

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

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Short Story Collection
« Volume 1 »

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Tuuli — My Little Sister's Gotten Weird

A previously unpublished chapter that appeared in the web novel around the time of Part 1 Volume 1. Tuuli muses that her younger sister has been acting strangely ever since recovering from her most recent fever. How did things seem from her perspective when Myne started making hair sticks, shampoo, and the like?

Author's Note: Myne's desperate for a bath but has to make do with being wiped down. Meanwhile, Tuuli struggles to understand why her little sister suddenly wants to wash every day. Please enjoy seeing the vast gap between their versions of common sense.

My little sister Myne has long straight hair the color of the night sky and eyes as golden as the moon. Even I think she's cute, and I'm her big sister.

Myne has a problem, though: she's always sick and gets fevers. Because she's unwell, she doesn't eat, and because she doesn't eat, she doesn't grow. She never goes outside, so her skin's scarily pale, and she never plays with me.

Even though I understand the reason, it makes me sad that I can't play with Myne like the other kids play with their brothers and sisters. She always says it's unfair that I get to go to the forest, but what I really want is for her to come with me.

And it's not like it's my fault she's sick.

Myne had a really, really high fever the other day. It got so bad that we thought she might die—especially when she couldn't eat or drink anything for three days.

I wonder if that fever's what made her go a little weird in the head...?

After my little sister's fever went down, she started saying all

these odd words I didn't understand. She'd get mad over the weirdest things, and she was nowhere near as obedient as usual. Now, instead of staying in bed, she'd go through the house while we were washing dishes and stuff. After her most recent search, she'd spent a whole day sobbing about something I really didn't understand.

Back then, I thought her strange behavior was because of the fever. But after she fully recovered, she got even weirder.

First of all, she began washing every single day!

It all started when her fever went away and she asked me to wipe her down because she was feeling super gross. I didn't think much of it at the time; she'd probably sweat a lot while she was sick, and she wasn't able to go to the river to wash herself. But every day after that, when we were heating water to make food, she had asked us to pour her some.

On the first day she cleaned herself, the water ended up really dirty. By the third, it came out clean. Yet she kept doing it every day.

I mean it! Every single day! That's just weird, right?!

I'd always give Myne a hand, since she said there were some spots she couldn't reach on her own, but it just didn't make sense to me.

"Isn't it a waste to use hot water when you're not dirty?" I asked.

"It's not a waste because I *am* dirty."

No matter what I said, Myne kept washing herself every day. For some reason, she tried washing *me* as well. She'd start rubbing my face with a damp cloth even when I told her I was fine and didn't need it. According to her, I was dirtier than she was because I went outside.

As usual, the warm water was still clean after Myne had a wash, but it went all dirty by the time I was finished. Seeing it actually made me a little uncomfortable, but Myne just smiled and said the water wasn't wasted if we both used it.

How can I make her understand that she's wrong? She doesn't get how hard it is bringing buckets all the way up from the well.

Myne's weirdness started to show in other ways too. Like, she suddenly began trying to put her hair up. We'd attempted that with her before, but her hair was so straight that it never stayed in place no matter how tightly we bound it. Eventually, we'd just given up.

But now here she was, trying all over again! She'd failed every single attempt, her cheeks puffed out in frustration, but then she started rummaging through my basket. It wasn't long before she pulled out my dearest treasure—a doll that our parents had worked together to make for me. Dad had shaped the wood, while Mom had made the clothes.

"Tuuli, can I snap this part off?"

"That's her leg! You're so mean, Myne!"

How could she even think about doing something like that?! I yelled at her, and she apologized while hanging her head. Then, she brushed aside her bangs and gave a heavy sigh. It was such a grown-up gesture that I actually gasped a little. She was only five, so how did she act so much like an adult?

"Well, um, Tuuli..." she said. "I want a stick like this. How can I get one?"

So she hadn't wanted the leg specifically... I could always make her a stick by cutting down some of our firewood, so I took out my knife and did just that, hoping to keep my precious doll safe.

Myne was really picky about the stick she wanted. She asked me to make one end a bit thinner without making it too sharp, but she was satisfied in the end.

"Thanks, Tuuli."

My little sister happily took the stick... and then stabbed it right into her head!

"Myne, what are you doing?!" I cried.

But while I was panicking, she started wrapping her hair around the stick. Somehow, using nothing but that piece of wood, she had managed to keep her tresses securely in place! It was magic like the nobles used, but I was even more surprised that she'd gone for a grown-up hairstyle.

"You can't do that, Myne," I said. "Only adults can put their hair up like that."

"Oh, I see..." she replied, her eyes wide. It was the most obvious fact in the world, so I didn't know why she was acting so surprised.

Myne pulled out the stick, letting her hair fall down. Then she put it back in and tried again, this time only tying back the top half.

"Is this better?" she asked.

"I think so."

From then on, Myne always used that stick to secure her hair. It was pretty weird—from the side, it looked like it was stabbing into

her head—but she seemed to like it.

Mom had today off work and was looking after Myne, which meant I could join everyone gathering in the forest. It had been forever since I'd last gone. We would pick up firewood, gather lots of fruit and mushrooms, and look for herbs that were good for flavoring meat. Everything we found would be important for our upcoming winter preparations, so all the kids worked their hardest.

I really hope Myne gets well soon so she can start coming with us...

Myne welcomed me back when I got home. She seemed healthy today.

"What did you get?" she asked, peering into my basket.

"Lemme see! Lemme see!" I'd gathered the same herbs and mushrooms as always, but she was looking at them like she was seeing them for the first time.

Myne's acting so weird...

All of a sudden, her eyes sparkled, and she pulled a meryl out of the basket. "Wow! Can I have one of these?"

This was a surprise; I couldn't remember the last time she'd asked for something like that. I gave her two.

"Thank you, Tuuli!"

Myne rubbed the meryls against her cheek, smiling like an angel, then disappeared into the storage room. She came back a few moments later with a hammer, looking all excited.

"Myne, wh—"

Before I could say anything else, she swung the hammer down on one of the meryls. There was a loud *splat* as juice squirted all over the place and all over me.

Smashing some fruit with a hammer is obviously going to make juice and stuff shoot all over the place, right? You shouldn't even need to think about it, right?!

"Uh, Myne... Why'd you do that?" I asked with a very stern smile, not even wiping the juice from my face. She flinched and let out a weird "bwuh" in response.

"You see, um... Well... I wanted oil, so...?"

Myne gazed up at me, her eyes hopeful and apologetic at the same time. She hadn't even thought about what might happen if she violently crushed the meryl.

"That's not how you get oil from fruit!" I shouted. "What's wrong with you?!"

“Oh...”

She looked sad, but I really had to wonder if she was okay in the head. Did she not remember us squeezing oil out of the fruit together just a couple weeks ago?

I think her last fever actually made her go crazy. I should speak to Mom about this...

Mom had gone to the well, and it was pretty obvious how she was going to react when she saw all this mess. I did my best to clean it up before she got back, but I didn't stand a chance; she soon came through the door and was just as angry as I'd expected. She yelled at me too, which really wasn't fair. At times like this, Myne wasn't cute at all.

“Tuuli, Tuuli,” Myne said in a quiet voice, trying not to anger Mom any further. “How do you get the oil out? Can you teach me?”

You're not being quiet at all, though. Look! Mom's already staring at us!

“Mom, can I teach Myne?” I asked.

She sighed. “Well... go ahead. If you don't, I'm sure we'll end up with another mess.” She pointed at the storage room, where all the stuff we'd want was kept. I could tell that she was still a bit annoyed.

And so, I took Myne into the storage room. The first step was to show her all the equipment we'd need.

“First things first,” I said. “You can't just smash the fruit on the table; the oil and juices will soak into the wood. You need to put it on this metal stand. Oh, and wrap some cloth around the fruit before you hit it. That way, the bits won't fly all over the place. We want to keep the fleshy part to eat, but you can get oil from the seed inside.”

“The oil from the seed won't be enough, though. I need it from the fruit as well.”

We tried crushing another meryl, this time using the proper method. Myne eagerly swung down the hammer again, but her aim was terrible, and her posture was all over the place. Plus, while she managed to smash the fruit, the seed inside wasn't breaking at all, and she wasn't strong enough to wring the cloth to squeeze out the rest of the juice.

“That's not good enough,” I said. “The seed isn't breaking, and there's no oil coming out.”

“Aww... Tuuuulii...”

Myne was giving me such a pathetic look that I decided to help. I took the hammer from her, but it was covered in so much juice that I could actually feel it sliding around in my hand. If I tried to swing it like this, it would probably end up halfway across the room. I wiped it clean, then gripped it tightly.

“To begin, crush the seed. Like this.”

Dad didn’t need to rely on a hammer or break the fruit into small pieces like we did—he could use juicing weights instead. We were too weak to use them ourselves, but that wasn’t much of a surprise; only boys were expected to have enough muscle to do tough jobs like that.

“Then squeeze the cloth like this...”

“Woow! You’re amazing, Tuuli!”

It was cute to see Myne celebrating over something as simple as oil dripping into a small cup. Her joy didn’t make my arms hurt any less, though.

“Thanks, Tuuli.”

“You need to clean up now, Myne. Don’t be lazy.”

She floundered, looking all over the place like she didn’t know how to. I taught her what to do while putting the tools away.

It was easy to forget that Myne was already five years old. She was so weak and very small—like, a lot smaller than was normal. She only had two more years before her baptism at the temple, then she’d need to find apprentice work. I was only a year away from being baptized myself.

Myne would need to start helping around the house when I became an apprentice, but how would she manage when she didn’t even know how to find or use our tools? She was already at a disadvantage because she was so tiny. Would anyone hire her after seeing that she couldn’t do any work either?

I need to get Mom to stop being so soft on Myne and start teaching her how to do things herself.

“Tuuli. Can I have some herbs too?” Myne asked.

“Just a few, okay?”

Myne started carefully smelling the herbs I’d gathered, then took a few and added them to the bowl of meryl oil. I figured she was trying to improve the smell, but some of the leaves she’d picked were for getting rid of bugs and weren’t appetizing at all.

Waaah... We should probably use that oil for dinner before Myne gets it all smelly.

But as I reached for the bowl, Myne stopped me with a crazy look in her eyes. “No! Tuuli! What’re you doing?!”

“We have to eat it soon, right? Otherwise those herbs you added are gonna make it taste nasty.”

“You can’t eat it!”

No matter what I said, Myne swung her head in protest and tried to keep the oil away from me. I looked to Mom for help.

“Myne! Don’t be selfish!” she yelled. “Tuuli went out and gathered those herself!”

“I’m not being selfish!” Myne cried. “She gave them to me!”

That was true, but I didn’t want any of the things I’d gathered to be wasted. This time, however, Myne didn’t back down, no matter how furious Mom got.

We eventually gave up on Myne—then she asked for some warm water. It was her usual request, but she looked especially excited for some reason. I poured some into the tub for her, then gawked as she dumped in some of the oil and started swishing it around.

“Myne?! What’re you doing?!”

“Washing my hair...?”

Once again, I didn’t have a clue what she was on about. She’d said and done so many weird things over the past few days. I continued to watch her, confused, as she dipped her hair in the tub and started rubbing the water into it. She splashed some of the water onto her scalp too.

Myne repeated this over and over until she was satisfied, then started squeezing her hair and dabbing it with a cloth until it was dry. From there, she used a comb—and it was then that I realized her hair was gleaming a lot more than I’d ever seen before.

“Myne, what’s this?”

“Mm... It’s (simple all-in-one shampoo).”

“Oh. So that’s what it’s called.”

After seeing Myne’s hair get so clean, I wanted to try some of whatever it was she’d made. I couldn’t just ask after I’d gotten so mad at her, though. Just imagining it made me feel awkward.

“Do you want to try some too?” Myne asked me with a smile. “There’s enough here for both of us. Plus, you gathered the meryl and the herbs, right? You even did all the juicing for me!”

In an instant, all of my awkwardness blew away. She was right that I’d gathered and prepared all of the ingredients. I undid my

braid, then put my hair in the tub and tried to copy what Myne had done. She even helped out, sticking her tiny hands in the water and using them to wash the places I couldn't quite reach.

"That should be enough," Myne eventually said.

And so, I got to work drying my hair. It was normally so poofy that I struggled to comb it, but now it was all smooth and straight. On top of that, it was so glossy! Just like Myne's! It was like she'd cast a magic spell on me.

"Wow, your hair's super pretty now!" Myne said as she eagerly ran the comb through it. "And you smell so nice!" For some reason, she seemed even happier than I was.

I'm glad to be clean now, but... why does Myne know so much about this stuff all of a sudden?

My little sister had *definitely* gotten weird. And the thought of her getting even weirder each time she came down with a fever was kind of scary.

"Okay. Let's clean up."

"Hold it right there."

Just as we were about to put the tub away, Mom came over and started washing her hair too. I turned to look at Myne, and we both giggled. My little sister was weird, that was for sure... but I was actually looking forward to whatever strange thing she might do next.

Lutz — My Savior

A previously unpublished chapter that appeared in the web novel around the time of Part 1 Volume 1. Lutz works with his brothers to gather parues, a very valuable winter fruit. These events didn't appear in any of the light novels, since Myne wasn't there to witness them, but they show how parues are actually collected.

Author's Note: It wasn't until this chapter that I properly fleshed out Sieg and Zasha; before then, they were just Big Bros 1 and 2. This was also the first chapter to show off the magical nature of the *Bookworm* world.

“C'mon, Lutz! Wake up!”

My older brother Zasha knocked me awake with a firm kick. I got out of bed, rubbing my eyes, and glanced at the crack under the window. For the past few days, the blizzard had kept any light from coming through—but now I could see something dazzlingly bright.

That means... the weather's clear!

My drowsiness disappeared all at once as I threw open the window, not caring how cold it would make the room. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky. Sure, the whole city was still covered in snow, but the sunlight made it look all nice and glittery.

I shut the window and raced to the kitchen. Clear days like this were really rare, so kids and adults all rushed to the forest as soon as possible. We really didn't want to be late.

“Hurry up, Lutz.”

Ralph, my third-eldest brother, had already eaten breakfast and was busily getting ready. I took some hard black bread, dunked it in some warm milk to soften it up, then scarfed it down before joining him.

Today was a great day for gathering. Everybody would go to the forest to get parues, which could only be found during winter.

They were in pretty high demand, since sweets were hard to come by no matter the time of year, so we'd need to act fast if we wanted any for ourselves.

Ralph wasn't the only one coming with me today—Zasha and Sieg were joining us instead of doing their usual apprentice work. We put on our baskets and the like, then rushed outside. With the four of us working together, we were sure to get a ton of parues.

Mom was standing by the well, and she gave us all a wave when she noticed us. "Going to the forest? Be careful, okay? And try to get as many as you can!" We weren't surprised to see her; she was always out here gossiping with the neighbors.

I'm real impressed she can put up with the cold for so long. Like, whew...

Also standing by the well was Mrs. Effa. She and Mom were good friends, so I'd grown up playing with her daughters, Tuuli and Myne.

"Tuuli and Gunther have already left," Mrs. Effa said. "You might want to hurry!"

Myne was probably staying at home; she always ended up bedridden when she went outside, especially on days like this. Just last autumn, while making her way to the farm for pig day, she'd apparently fallen sick and passed out in the wagon. The same thing had happened the year before too.

Really sucks that she missed out on the fresh sausages. They're real good.

Myne was tiny, weak, adorable... and pretty much barely clinging to life. We were the same age, but she was like a little sister to me.

Oh yeah... Back during winter prep, didn't she say something about wanting some plant stems? That's rare for her. Wonder what she's gonna do with 'em...

By the time we'd passed through the south gate and reached the forest, the battle for parues had already started. Everyone was going nuts for them, and for good reason—they were a rare sweet you could only find on really clear winter days when the snow was still thick on the ground.

"Sieg! Go to that tree!"

The moment Zasha gave the instruction, my second-eldest brother let go of the rope connected to our sled and ran off. He pushed through the snow on his way to the parue tree, then

immediately started climbing it. The rest of us moved away and started preparing a fire.

We dug into the snow until we could see the earth underneath, then put down and ignited some firewood. Sieg was still up in the tree, deciding which fruit to pick.

“It’s about done,” Zasha said to me. “Get ready.”

At his say-so, I made my way up the tree myself, aiming to reach Sieg. Like all parue trees, it had bark as white as ice and snow, and while all the branches made it easy to climb, the fruit only grew really high up.

To make things even more complicated, parue trees weren’t normal trees—they were feyplants. You couldn’t just remove their fruit with knives, which was what made it annoying to get.

It wasn’t long before I reached Sieg.

“Ready, Lutz?”

“Just a moment.”

I quickly pulled off my gloves and grabbed the thin branch that Sieg was holding. He put his own gloves on, then went to hurry back down the tree.

“Eugh, so cold... Lutz, you do the rest. Shouldn’t be much longer.”

The branch I was squeezing was cold as ice, and the air had a biting chill to it. My body temperature was going down fast.

Hurry up and fall already!

I was using my bare hands for a reason: you had to warm parue branches to harvest their fruit. Using fire absolutely wasn’t an option because the mana in the tree would put out the flames.



Still nothing? Come on... What was that about it not taking much longer?

I could feel the branch gradually getting softer, but the fruit just wasn't falling. My fingers were prickling and starting to go numb... but just as I was about to call for someone to take my place, there was movement.

"Lutz, I'll trade."

"It's almost done, Zasha."

"Ralph! Here it comes!"

The moment Zasha grabbed the branch, the parue fruit about as big as my face dropped straight down. He had been warming his hands by the fire, so they were a lot warmer than mine were now. Ralph was waiting below to grab the fallen fruit.

"Head back to the fire and warm up," Zasha said to me. "Your hands are bright red." He then went to hunt for the next fruit.

I put my gloves back on and climbed down the tree, being extra careful not to fall. Then, after running over to the fire, I took my gloves off again and held my hands up to the crackling heat. The feeling slowly returned to my fingers—along with a prickling ache.

"I'm tossing the fruit over!" Ralph shouted. "Get ready!"

He threw the parue in our direction, then climbed up the tree to trade places with Zasha. The fruit hit the ground a short distance away and rolled over, at which point Sieg snatched it up and dropped it in our basket. Thankfully, parues were like clumps of ice; as long as it was cold, they wouldn't break no matter how rough you were with them.

"Whew... Talk about cold," Zasha said, rubbing his hands as he hurried over to the fire. "You go get the next one, Sieg."

"Right!"

It was Sieg's turn to put on gloves and run to the tree.

Coordination was a key part of parue gathering—and the more people with warm hands you had to switch around, the better off you were. We'd managed to get five parues so far.

"Almost noon," Zasha said, glaring up at the sky. "Think we can get one more? Lutz, get your hands as warm as possible, then go swap with Sieg."

My hands were still red. Worse still, either because of the icy branches or because I was holding them too close to the fire, they'd

turned completely numb again. Days like this didn't come often, though; if we could get one more parue, then I was going to try. I warmed myself up as best I could, ran back to the tree, then climbed all the way up to where Sieg was waiting.

"It's getting kinda soft. Shouldn't take much longer."

"Got it."

Just as Sieg and I were trading places and our sixth fruit was about to fall, light shone down from above. It was noon. The leaves of the parue trees sparkled as brilliantly as jewels, and the trees themselves began shaking as if they had a mind of their own, creating a loud rustling sound.

"Oh no! Get down, Lutz!" my brothers shouted just as the bough beneath me began to shake. I'd already been leaning away from the tree to warm the branch with the fruit on it, so I soon lost my footing entirely. The next thing I knew, I was dangling from the branch and nothing more.

"Whoa!"

I instinctively reached out and grabbed the branch with my other hand.

"No, Lutz! Let go! You need to get down! NOW!"

But before I could even react, the branch became too soft to hold my weight. It snapped, sending me and the parue hurtling toward the ground.

"Gaaah!"

After a bit of a shock, the thick, fluffy snow broke my fall. Because I'd been hanging from the branch, I'd also landed on my feet, so I wasn't hurt or anything.

All around us, people were jumping down from the trees. Parue-gathering time was over.

There was even more rustling as the parue trees began growing up toward the sky. They quickly became the tallest trees in the forest as they searched for the sun, waving their lush green leaves like a girl shaking her hair. The light soon reached the fruit that hadn't been gathered, making it shoot off in all directions.

Once the fruit was all gone, the parue trees basically started to melt, becoming smaller and smaller until they disappeared completely. That was the end of their life cycle. They only showed up on clear winter days and were different from any other trees in the forest.

"Well, that's that. Time to go home."

We all got our parues and made our way back. Every home would be preparing sweets this afternoon. Getting the fruit was hard work, but the results were something to look forward to.

“Guess we get one each.”

The parues had been about as big as my face back in the forest, but the outer layer had started to melt soon after we left. By the time we got home, they were much smaller than before.

“Are the bowls ready?”

We used the fireplace to ignite some thin twigs, then pushed them into our parues. The burning wood broke through the skin, and out came this thick, white juice. A sweet aroma quickly filled the house.

My mouth was watering as I made sure to get all of the sweet-smelling fruit juice into my cup. Part of me wanted to drink it all at once, but it was such a valuable sweet that I knew I should treasure every drop.

After getting out the juice, we crushed the rest of the fruit to get parue oil. It could be used for cooking or as fuel for lamps, so it was real nice to have this late into the winter.

Soon enough, we’d squeezed the parues into small pieces. They were dry and barely edible, but they were good for the chickens. We knew that ’cause the chickens that ate parue scraps made even tastier eggs.

“Excuse me. I’m here for a trade.”

Lots of people came to our house to trade their parue scraps for eggs. Personally, I didn’t think it was a very good deal. The chickens loved the scraps, sure, but we probably would have been better off eating the eggs ourselves.

At least bring us meat or something. We always cook enough eggs to get one each, but when we have meat, my brothers take it all before I even get a chance.

As I was thinking that, Myne and Tuuli showed up. They’d brought a bag containing maybe two parues’ worth of scraps.

“Lutz, here. We’ll trade you these for eggs,” Myne said, wearing a great big smile as she eagerly offered me the bag. I wasn’t too happy about the exchange, but I couldn’t just turn them away or else Mom would yell at me.

“We’ve already got enough animal feed,” I said. “Got any meat instead? My older brothers keep stealing all of mine.”

Most of my family stayed at home during winter, which meant

my food got stolen more often. In other words, I was hungry pretty much all the time. I knew there was no point in grumbling to Tuuli or Myne, but I couldn't help myself.

"It's hard to fight back when they're so much bigger," Tuuli said with a sympathetic smile, brushing my complaints aside. Myne must have had some kind of idea, though, because she suddenly thrust the bag at me again.

"Okay, Lutz. Why not just eat this?"

"That stuff's for the birds!" I yelled without even thinking. I'd always been so nice to Myne, so why was she making such a cruel suggestion?

In response to my outrage, Myne just tilted her head at me and muttered, "Not if you make it right..."

"Huh?"

"It's only inedible when you squeeze all the juice out. Even leftovers can taste really good if you prepare them right."

Myne was acting serious, but her words were so hard to believe. I mean, nobody ate chicken feed. I turned to Tuuli for an explanation, but she just shrugged and gave a tired smile. As it turned out, Myne had eaten the actual fruit part of a parue before!

"Seriously?!" I cried. "That's such a waste! Sure, you *could* eat the parue and be done with it, but it's way more efficient to squeeze out the juice and oil, then give the rest to the chickens!"

In truth, it was at this time of year that we needed chicken feed the most, so nobody here would ever think about eating it. Besides, it was crazy to imagine working so hard for some fruit and then *not* using it efficiently. Myne was probably the only person in the whole city dumb enough to do something like that.

"You said yourself that you have enough feed, right?" Myne asked. "Then shouldn't you guys eat these scraps yourselves?"

"Aren't you listening? The leftovers are so dry that nobody would eat them!"

"They only end up like that because people squeeze as much oil out of them as possible. If you're a little more creative, they're fine to eat."

"Y'know, Myne..."

I could feel my strength draining away. Myne kept saying all these crazy things—and with that innocent smile on her face!

What's this I'm feeling? It's like... I can't convince her, no matter what I say. Is it powerlessness? A sense of defeat?

“Um, Lutz...” Tuuli said quietly.

At last, a voice of reason. Myne was sure to listen when her big sister Tuuli explained that chicken feed wasn't for humans. But in response to my hopeful stare, Tuuli just hung her head.

“I know it's hard to believe,” she continued, “but the scraps really are edible. They, um... They taste so good that it kind of shocked me.”

“Wait, seriously? She made you eat chicken feed, Tuuli?!”

Myne had already tried this weird idea on her family. That explained why she was so confident about it.

“You just need to taste it for yourself,” Myne said, sticking some of the dry-looking scraps in a small cup. “Do you have any fruit juice left over?”

She ended up adding two small spoonfuls of my share of the fruit juice to her cup of scraps before mixing it all together. Then, she took a tiny bite and nodded to herself.

“Open wide, Lutz,” she said.

As if making me eat chicken feed wasn't bad enough, she'd wanted me to waste some of my precious parue juice too? It all seemed way too vicious. But after seeing Myne eat some without batting an eye, I nervously opened my mouth.

Myne dipped a finger in the yellow stuff we'd made, then placed some on my tongue. The sweetness spread through my mouth right away. It was amazing to think that just a little bit of juice had completely changed the taste of the parue pieces and made them not dry at all. I was used to drinking my share of the juice we made, trying to savor it as best I could, but now I could make it last even longer by mixing it with scraps.

“See?” Myne said, smiling proudly. “Sweet and tasty, isn't it?” But the words had barely left her mouth when my brothers, who had been watching suspiciously up until now, rushed over and swarmed us.

“Seriously? Lemme try some, Lutz.”

At once, they all stuck their fingers into the little cup. I grabbed it and tried to keep them away, but it was no use; they were so much bigger than me.

“Hey, let go!” I cried. “What kinda people steal from their own little brother?!”

“Your stuff is my stuff.”

“Share your tasty food with everyone, Lutz.”

“Alright! I got it!”

My resistance did nothing. They snatched the cup away from me, then kept prodding their grubby little fingers inside. In the blink of an eye, there was nothing left.

“Gaaah! My parue!” I shouted. But my brothers were too busy gaping at Myne to pay me any notice.

“Tasty...”

“Was that really chicken feed?”

As if she hadn’t already done enough, Myne shyly scratched her cheek and said something even more unbelievable: “I could make something even better while I’m here.”

“For real?!”

I couldn’t blame my brothers for jumping at the offer; Zasha, the oldest, was always complaining about being hungry no matter how much he ate. Having another way to make chicken feed into something delicious would be awesome.

“Ah, but I might need some help...” Myne continued. “Since I’m so weak and all.” I was already well aware that she didn’t have any strength or stamina. If all she needed to make some tasty sweets was a helping hand, then I was fully on board.

“Alright,” I said. “Leave it to me.”

“Hold on, Lutz,” one of my brothers said. “You ain’t getting it all for yourself. We’ll help too, Myne. I’m a lot stronger than him anyway.” All of a sudden, they’d become really willing to assist us.

I was worried that there wouldn’t be anything for me to do, but Myne happily gave all of us tasks to complete.

“Yay! Okay, I want you two to get a metal griddle we can cook with. Lutz can prepare the ingredients, and Ralph can mix them. Oh, and it wouldn’t be fair to only use Lutz’s juice, so how about you all contribute, okay? Come on, everyone, let’s see your juice. No use hiding it.”

She clapped her hands together like Mom would do, acting as if she were an adult, then got us all to put our juice on the table. At that moment, I really thought she was a genuine angel. If she hadn’t forced my brothers to chip in as well, they definitely would have mooched off of me.

“Lutz, would you get two eggs and some milk? Ralph, mix them together with that spatula over there.”

Myne was normally useless, but here she was instructing us all with a lively expression. Zasha and Sieg brought over the griddle

and started warming it on the hearth. Meanwhile, Myne was adding ingredients to a bowl, while Ralph was mixing them all together with a wooden spatula. I was running around and getting all the other things Myne asked me for.

“Okay, that should be good,” she eventually said. “Lutz, do you have butter?”

We did, so I went and got some. Myne took a small spoonful, then climbed onto a tallish chair to reach the hearth. We were all watching her with our hearts in our throats, worried that she might fall, but she probably hadn’t noticed.

The butter hissed as soon as it touched the pan and started to get smaller. At the same time, it gave off a delicious smell that made me feel even hungrier. Myne then used a biggish spoon to pour in the batter that Ralph had been mixing. The hissing was replaced with sizzling, and the buttery aroma became mixed with the sweetness of the parues. It smelled dangerously good. The actual batter reminded me of the pancakes Mom made from grated potatoeffels, but ours was sure to be way sweeter.

“And that’s how you do it,” Myne said. “Would you all work together to make more?” Now that she’d given a demonstration, she was leaving the rest of the cooking to us. At most, she was going to watch the griddle and give instructions.

That was fine, though. We’d only needed to see the process once to learn how to do it ourselves. Plus, it was much safer to have the taller people deal with all the cooking; having to watch Myne wobble on top of a chair wouldn’t be good for any of our hearts. My brothers must have agreed because they took the cooking tools from her right away.

“When they get bumpy, it means they’re ready,” Myne told us. “You should turn that one over now.”

Zasha used the spatula to flip over one of the parue pancakes. The underside was a really good color—so good that I nearly drooled. I could hear everyone else swallowing hard too.

“Move that pancake over,” Myne said, pointing at the griddle. “You can cook another one in the open spot.”

Once a pancake was cooked enough, it was moved to the side of the griddle, then more butter and batter were added to the newly made space. The ones that Myne said were fully cooked were stacked on a plate.

It wasn’t long before we had an entire plate of pancakes.

“Ta-daaa!” Myne announced. “(Simple okara pancakes!)” She was wearing a beaming smile, but none of us had a clue what she’d just said. We all stared at her, a little bit weirded out.

“Wha?” I eventually asked. “Say that again?”

Myne pulled an awkward face like she’d just made some kind of mistake, then said, “Umm... Simple parue caaakes...”

The parue cakes now sitting on the table were giving off so much steam. I wanted to wolf them all down at once.

“Go ahead and eat up!” Myne said. “But be careful—they’re hot!”

I broke off a bite-size piece and stuck it in my mouth. As it turned out, parue cakes were shockingly tasty! To start with, they were fluffy—not at all dry like chicken feed. And unlike the potatoffel pancakes that Mom made, these were plenty sweet even without jam. I didn’t have to worry about my brothers taking my share either, since we’d gotten one each.

“Hey, Lutz,” Myne said. “These were pretty simple to make, right? And don’t they fill you right up?”

“They do. Myne, I dunno what to say. You’re amazing.”

We had tons of parue scraps from all the people who’d come to trade with us, and our chickens laid eggs nonstop, so we had plenty to give. Some people even gave us milk for our eggs, so we’d be able to make parue cakes all winter long.

“I know of some other things you can make with parue leftovers, but I’m too weak to do all the cooking myself.”

“I’ll make them for you if you just teach me how.”

After today’s events, one thing was clear to me: if I followed Myne’s instructions, I’d get to eat more tasty food.

And so, Myne started coming over on sunny days to teach us how to make new tasty dishes from parues. It was thanks to her that I spent the winter way less hungry than usual.

She’s my savior. That’s why I’m gonna use my strength and stamina—things she doesn’t have—to help her out.

From that point on, I was determined to assist Myne however I could. It was a decision that would end up changing my entire life—though, at the time, I was too overjoyed about parue cakes to realize it.

Gunther — My Daughter's About to Be a Criminal?!

A previously unpublished chapter that appeared in the web novel around the time of Part 1 Volume 1. Gunther has to cope with Myne going to the forest for the first time after building up her stamina. He impatiently awaits her return, unaware of all the trouble surrounding her clay tablets.

Author's Note: I wanted to describe Myne's eyes changing colors from someone else's perspective and ended up choosing Gunther to narrate. It was fun writing as him.

I have a beautiful wife called Effa and two adorable daughters, Tuuli and Myne. My youngest, Myne, actually looks a lot like Effa, but she's got an even prettier face. That's how I know she's loved by the gods. Her sickness was a result of that love too—I'm sure she's always falling unconscious because the gods are inviting her over all the time.

Myne had pretty much always ended up with a fever the instant she pushed herself even a little too hard, but that wasn't really the case anymore. All of a sudden, completely out of the blue, she'd started trying to get better. And it was working. Sure, she'd also begun doing and saying weird things, but she was doing her best to build up stamina in her own way. It hadn't been too long ago when she'd needed to rest after taking a few steps outside, but after a season of dedication, she was able to walk all the way to the gate without stopping.

Impressive, ain't it? My daughter's a hard worker.

On top of that, Myne was real smart. Well, that's what I was told, at least; I was never any good at judging that kinda stuff myself. There wasn't a doubt in my mind about her being the real

deal, though. Otto had always refused to hire any assistants—he called them “dead weight” and always said they’d just waste his time—but now he was pretty much begging me to let Myne work under him.

Otto had told me that Myne could spot calculation errors just from looking at finance reports and had mastered the alphabet after just a bit of studying. Now she was learning about forms and letter templates. He’d also said that she kept a good eye on her surroundings, noticed even the slightest changes, and adapted her thinking to accomplish her goals. Apparently, she was pretty much in a league of her own.

The heck does all that mean?

I only really followed about half of what Otto had said to me, but I understood the gist: my daughter was so smart that not even he could believe it.

That’s my daughter. She really is loved by the gods.

Today, Myne was going to the forest for the first time. I was on the noon shift, so I was planning to welcome her back... but I was real worried.

“Calm down, Captain,” Otto said.

“Hm? Ah... yeah.”

She could reach the gate without issue, but would she make it all the way to the forest? Even if she did, she wouldn’t get to rest indoors like when she came to help Otto; she’d be stuck outside the whole time. Maybe the sun would make her sick or she’d collapse with a fever. I couldn’t stop worrying about her.

“Captain, don’t just stare off into the distance,” Otto said.

“Myne would be so disappointed if she saw you like this.”

“Otto, you... Don’t ever say that!”

“Then get back to work. She won’t be back until evening, right?”

The real irritating thing was that Myne called this smug dope her “teacher.” She really seemed to respect him.

Though she respects me a lot more, obviously. Heh.

After all, she’d said I was the best back when I made her a crochet hook and that stick for Tuuli’s hair ornament.

I tried to focus on my work and direct my subordinates, but I was nervous beneath the surface. The girls would come back soon, I was sure. Tuuli was responsible, and she’d promised to leave the forest early. Given that Myne was so weak and slow, maybe they’d

even start heading back around noon.

Noon passed. It was still too soon for them to be heading back. That was obvious.

The sun was starting its descent. Still nothing. They'd probably show up soon.

More and more people were leaving the city... but there was still no sign of the kids.

"She promised to come back early, so it shouldn't be long now," Otto assured me. "Please, Captain—stop glaring at everyone passing through. It's inappropriate."

We'd reached the point of the day when there weren't as many farmers leaving the city after selling their crops as there were people entering the city to return home or find an inn for the night. Myne and Tuuli should have been showing up about now too, but they were nowhere to be seen. So much for coming back early.

This is taking too long! Tuuli, weren't you going to come back sooner than usual?! Has something happened to Myne?!

I could already picture Myne collapsed on the side of the road and Tuuli panicking over what to do. No way was I going to wait around.

"Otto, I'm gonna go search for 'em."

"And abandon your post?! W-Wait, look! Isn't that Tuuli?!"

"Where?!"

Otto was standing on tiptoe and staring in the direction of the forest. He was taller than me, so he could see farther. "She just joined the end of the line of people coming to the gate. Let's work through them as quickly as we can."

"You can count on me!"

Immediately I set about processing everyone trying to come through the gate, working at lightning speed so that Tuuli and the others could get back into the city as soon as possible. The line was moving a lot faster than before, and it wasn't long before I could see the kids myself.

Wait, did they... just join the queue?! Gah! You tricked me, Otto!

But as they came closer, I noticed something—Myne wasn't with them. My eyes darted all over the place. Tuuli was responsible;

no way would she have abandoned her little sister.

“Tuuli, where’s Myne?!”

“Lutz is going to bring her back later,” she said. “I think they’ll arrive right before the gate closes.”

She turned back toward the forest, looking worried, but Myne and Lutz were nowhere to be seen. If they were going to be back as late as she’d said, then that meant they hadn’t left early.

“Didn’t you promise to come back early?” I asked. “What happened...?”

The other kids started exchanging conflicted looks. It was like they were all trying to hide something.

“Tuuli, what in the world...?”

“A lot happened,” Tuuli said. “Can I tell you about it later? We’re running kinda late, so everyone’s moms are probably worried. I need to get them all home.”

I wanted to stand my ground and demand that she spill it here and now, but she was gone before I could even try. The other kids followed after her, looking exhausted.

“The heck happened...?” I wondered aloud. “Otto, any ideas?”

“It can’t be anything serious or else they would have asked for help.” He sounded completely disinterested, but Tuuli usually told me everything—even when I didn’t ask her to. It was no wonder that I was so worried.

What’s going on with Myne?!

I paced back and forth in front of the gate, so anxious that I was starting to get frustrated. It wasn’t until right before the gate was about to close that Myne finally returned, pale and leaning against Lutz.

“Myne!”

“Sorry, Dad...”

She apologized so quietly that I could barely even hear her before collapsing into my arms. Lutz helped me to remove the basket from her back, which was empty aside from a shovel, then I hoisted her up.

“Lutz! What’s going on?!” I shouted. “What was she apologizing for?!”

“Uh... Probably for intentionally breaking her promise,” he replied, rubbing his head. “She started digging holes and making clay tablets all of a sudden... then she got really mad at Fey’s group and started crying. She was so all over the place that she’ll probably

be stuck in bed for at least three days.”

My eyes shot open. “You didn’t stop her?!”

Lutz’s face twisted into a grimace. “Uh, Mr. Gunther... Do you not think we tried...?”

Ah. *Obviously* they’d done their best. It was because Lutz and Tuuli had such a good track record of looking after Myne that I’d felt safe leaving her in their hands to begin with. Lutz in particular was such a good caretaker to Myne that it was hard to believe they were the same age.

“Right. Of course... My bad.”

“Don’t yell at Tuuli either,” Lutz said. “She worked hard. Oh, but you *can* yell at Myne. I did. Though she basically ignored me.”

Myne’s fever was getting worse while she was slumped in my arms, and her pale face was beginning to turn red.

“Well, I’ll leave her to you,” Lutz said. “I need to hurry home.”

“Yeah. Thanks for looking after her. You were a big help.”

I took Myne into the waiting room and laid her down on one of the benches. It was pretty much her second home at this point. Her cheeks were even more flushed, and she was breathing heavily.

After speeding through the rest of my work, I picked Myne up again and hurried home.

“Welcome back, Gunther,” Effa said when I came through the door. “Myne collapsed, didn’t she?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Effa got Myne changed and put her to bed. I took a seat at the table, directly across from Tuuli, eager to find out what had happened.

“So, what’s the deal, hm?” I asked. “Lutz gave me a rough idea, but I want to hear your side of the story.”

Tuuli shivered and gave me a wary look. She was such a diligent girl with a strong sense of responsibility. Maybe her desire to do everything perfectly was why she seemed so scared of messing up.

“Lutz told me not to get mad at you,” I explained, trying to calm her down. “He said you did your best. He *also* said I’ve got every right to be angry at Myne. So, come on—what actually happened?”

Once she knew I wasn’t going to shout at her, Tuuli softened up. Her eyes wandered around the room like she was trying to find the right words, then she said, “I don’t actually know that much. Myne was tired as usual when we arrived at the forest, so she sat on

a rock to catch her breath while Lutz and I went gathering. I remember thinking that we'd need to be quick, since we were going to be leaving earlier..."

"Makes sense. And then?"

Tuuli frowned. "Just as I was going to ask about us heading home, I heard Myne scream. I rushed back to her, but by the time I arrived she was already crying and yelling. She kept saying that Fey and the other boys ruined something she made. I couldn't even calm her down—that's how mad she was. She just kept saying that she'd make them pay... Lutz got her to stop crying in the end, but only by saying that he'd help her remake whatever it was that got ruined."

I closed my eyes, trying to piece together the scene from what Tuuli had told me.

Nope, I still don't really understand it. Myne made something, Fey ruined it, then she got angry?

"What was it that Myne made?" I asked.

"I don't really know. They're called tab-somethings... I think they're pretty much just lumps of clay? We were so late coming back because we were all making them together."

I was still confused, but one thing was clear as day to me.

"So basically... Myne broke her promise not to do anything in the forest?"

"Um... Probably."

Myne had ignored our promise in order to make something, then that something had gotten ruined. Everyone had gotten wrapped up in helping her fix it, making them late to return, then she'd ended up sick again. She couldn't have been more troublesome if she'd tried.

"I'm not gonna let Myne go to the forest again," I concluded.

"What?! No!" Tuuli exclaimed. "Myne will get really mad!" She had gone all pale for some reason, but I didn't care how angry Myne got. *I was angry at her* for breaking the promise she'd sworn up and down she was going to keep.

"Too bad," I said. "Kids who don't keep promises don't get to go to the forest."

I needed to give Myne a good scolding too. It was dangerous for kids to break promises—especially ones they'd made so they could work alone while their parents were busy.

"Dad, please! Don't do this!" Tuuli cried, clinging to my arm

when I tried going to the bedroom. She was desperate to stop me. But as much as she loved her little sister, Myne needed a proper talking-to.

“No. I’m not letting Myne go to the forest again! This is what happens when you don’t keep your promises!”

Myne must have heard my voice because she looked up at me. Her face was still red and her eyes wet from the fever, but that didn’t stop her from speaking up.

“Dad... Once more. Just... once. Need to make... (clay tablets).”

I’d expected a “sorry” or at least some kind of self-reflection, but no. Apparently, she still planned on doing something in the forest. The blood rushed to my head in an instant.

“What’re you saying?!” I barked. “Absolutely not!”

Myne let out a weak sigh, then looked at Tuuli, who was now standing beside her. “Okay... Tuuli... I’ll do it here, then...”

“O-Okay...” Tuuli replied. “I’ll make sure to bring them back.”

Hold on, Tuuli... Why’re you just going along with this? And you, Myne—what are you planning to do here? Are you ignoring how furious I am?!

“What’s this you’re talking about?” I said. “It’s what made Myne collapse, isn’t it?! No way am I gonna let you bring it back here!”

Myne’s face became cold and expressionless. It was like something had switched in her; out of nowhere, she’d turned into a completely different person. Her golden eyes narrowed, then suddenly they weren’t gold anymore. They blended from one color into the next, like the surface of a thin layer of oil.

“Do you mean that, Dad...?” Her quiet voice was so intense all of a sudden that I got chills. She wasn’t acting anything like my daughter, and I instinctively took a step back.

“O-Of course I do!”

“I see...” Myne looked away as if she’d completely lost interest in me. “Then... I’ll need to squash Fey and the others like they squashed my tablets. Ahaha.”

Myne’s eyes kept turning all sorts of colors, and her thin, cruel smile sent a shiver down my spine. I couldn’t even imagine what the girl in front of me was thinking. Something was seriously off about her.

“Dad! You need to tell Myne she can go to the forest again!” Tuuli exclaimed, hitting my arm over and over again, her face as white as if she’d seen a monster.

“Myne, what are you planning?”

“Hmm? I’m just thinking of a way to make sure Fey can never go to the forest again either. Perhaps some (psychological trauma)? Something from a (horror movie)? Maybe I should pull a (Sadako) from (The Ring)...”

Maybe it was just because of her fever, but she was mumbling words I couldn’t even understand. To make things worse, the words I was able to make out sounded pretty gruesome. Was it just my imagination? It had to be. Maybe they’d only *seemed* gruesome because her voice was so strained. My daughter wasn’t anyone that scary.

“Uh, what’s Fey got to do with this? Pretty sure he’s not important here.”

“What do you mean?” Myne asked. “He’s *very* important. Anyway, I understand what you mean. I understand completely.” She nodded over and over again, clearly struggling to breathe.

I’d ended up getting sucked into Myne’s weird aura for a bit, but it seemed like everything had worked out in the end. She was a smart kid, so she had to understand what she’d done wrong.

“That’s grea—”

“I’ll make them cry themselves to death. Okay, I’m going to sleep now.”

“Myne! You don’t understand at all, do you?! How is *that* what you took away from all this?!”

What was running through her head to make her say something like that? And make who cry?! Me?! I’m almost on the verge of tears already!

“Shut up” was Myne’s immediate response. “Leave me alone.”

“Dad, come on!” Tuuli cried, trying to drag me away by the arm. “Don’t make Myne any angrier!”

Both of my daughters clearly wanted me out of the room, so I let Tuuli pull me into the kitchen.

“Tuuli... was that really Myne?” I asked.

“This must be what happens when she gets *really* mad... She got like this when Fey and his friends stepped on her tablets too. Her eyes started glowing and went all terrifying. I remember she was also letting off some kind of yellow mist... Everyone was really scared.”

Yeah, I was scared too. Must’ve been even worse for the kids.

“Myne cheered up after we started making the tablet things

again, and none of us dared to say we should stop and go home..."

After what I'd just seen, that was no surprise. I would have wanted to leave her alone too.

"I ended up having to plead with Myne that it was almost time for the gate to close," Tuuli said. "She only stopped when Lutz said that he'd help her finish the tablets next time... The rest of us promised as well before we left."

So... Tuuli had only managed to keep Myne under control by saying they'd go back to the forest another time. Then I'd come along and said that Myne was banned from going there ever again. Now I understood.

"Dad, can Myne go to the forest just one more time? It's scary how angry at Fey and the others she is. What does she mean when she says she'll squash them like they squashed her tablets?"

"What even *are* these tablet things?"

"I think she means she's going to flatten them like they flattened her tablets... but how?" Tuuli muttered. "Will she actually stomp them to bits? And what's she going to do to stop them from going to the forest again? How will she make them cry? Dad, what do you think's going to happen to them?"

If she really was being serious, then the fastest way for her to achieve her goal would be to cripple Fey and the others or slice the tendons in their legs. The blood immediately drained from my face. Doing something like that would make Myne a criminal, no two ways about it! Just what was she planning?!

"Tuuli, what can we do to stop Myne?"

"I don't know... Try asking Lutz. He's the one who stopped Myne in the forest."

The next day, I pulled Lutz aside when he was passing through the gate and asked him what Myne had meant. It was possible that Tuuli had just been taking her too seriously... but Lutz cut down my remaining hopes like they were nothing.

"I mean... she's obviously gonna smash Fey and the others to pieces. Nobody can stop Myne when she's got those rainbow eyes."

"Wha?"

"Myne's like a feybeast that'll chomp your leg the moment you let your guard down and never let go. She'll accomplish anything she's set her mind on, no matter what she has to do or how long it'll take her." He puffed out his chest. "Impressive, right?"

Uh, Lutz? Is your head on right? That would make her real dangerous when she wants to hurt someone, wouldn't it? And why are you acting all proud of her? She's my daughter, not yours!

"It's the same thing with the clay tablets. They're the reason Myne spent three whole months building up enough stamina to go to the forest. Nothing can stop her from getting what she wants."

"She cares about the tablets that much...?"

It really hadn't occurred to me that Myne was so invested in making these tablet things. Maybe I'd been too quick to ban her from working on them... But just as I was starting to have a change of heart, Lutz dropped another bomb.

"Let's see... Fey and his group ruined the tablets that Myne put so much work into making. This meant she had to remake them, which made us late to leave, then she came down with a fever on our way back. She got banned from the forest too, so now she can't even go fetch the tablets she's already made. That's a lot to be angry about, and it's all gonna be directed at Fey's lot, huh? I wonder if they're gonna survive."

"Don't say that! D'you *want* my daughter to be a criminal?!"

She'd said she was going to make them cry, that was all.

Everything was going to be fine. I really wanted to believe that.

"Uh, well... *you're* the one who'd be making her a criminal."

"Huh? Me?"

"You're the one who banned her from going to the forest and making her tablets, right? Y'know, the thought of Myne going all out on someone really scares me. I support her, but I don't get in her way. And as for putting a stop to her efforts entirely? No way. Absolutely no way."

"It... scares you?" I repeated, blinking.

Myne was almost six, but anyone who saw her would think she was only three or four. She was weak, sickly, and had barely any stamina to speak of. For those reasons, I'd assumed that her "going all out" wouldn't actually mean much... but here Lutz was, in total disagreement.

"I mean, Myne's brain doesn't work like ours do," he explained, looking completely serious. "Sure, if she went after them with a weapon, she'd be too weak to do any damage, but she'd never approach the situation like that. I don't know what she'd do in any detail, but I can tell you one thing: she'd find out their weaknesses and target them when they least expect it. Real scary."

I groaned. I'd never even considered that Lutz and I might have different opinions like this. I, for one, couldn't even imagine Myne being so ruthless—but the unimaginable was terrifying in itself.

"Not long ago, she beat even Sieg. He actually had to beg her to stop. Myne says that strength isn't everything—and she's actually right. Lately, I've started beating my brothers too."

Hold on, what?! This is the first I'm hearing about this! What'd she do to beat Sieg?! What's my daughter been up to?!

"Er, Lutz... this is a serious question. How can I keep Myne's wrath under control?"

"Pile a ton of clay in front of her. If you do that, all she'll think about is finishing her tablets."

After my conversation with Lutz, I very begrudgingly decided to give Myne permission to return to the forest. The last thing I wanted was for her to end up a criminal. But when I gave her the good news, she puffed out her cheeks in displeasure.

"Aw, but I came up with so many ways to get my revenge... Wouldn't it be a shame to let them go to waste?" Even while battling a fever, she'd apparently made plans to stomp her enemies.

"Definitely not! Forget about revenge!"

"Tch..."

I wasn't sure whether we'd ended up in this mess as a result of Myne being too smart or too angry, but we'd escaped by the skin of our teeth. I'd saved my daughter from a future as a criminal and Fey's bunch from an untimely demise, keeping the peace and protecting my family's happiness. Lutz deserved all my gratitude for having helped me resolve this.

I sighed in relief... but then something suddenly occurred to me.

Wait, what happened to punishing her for breaking her promise?

Wilma — Servants of Sister Christine

A previously unpublished chapter that appeared in the web novel around the time of Part 2 Volume 1. It focuses on how Wilma spends her days in the orphanage after becoming an attendant and provides an insight into how she sees Myne and the orphans. Also included is her conversation with Rosina about the latter's future in the temple.

Author's Note: Rosina started out as a troublemaker in Myne's eyes, but that was because their views of the world around them were so contradictory. I wanted to write a chapter exploring Rosina's perspective in a little more detail and ended up choosing Wilma to be the narrator, as readers were more familiar with the character and seemed to understand her better.

Sister Myne, an apprentice blue shrine maiden, recently accepted me as an attendant. I expressed to her my desire to stay within the confines of the orphanage, and in response she granted me her approval—as well as the duties of taking care of the pre-baptism children and overseeing the orphanage.

“Have the divine gifts been served to everyone?” I asked. “Yes? Then let us offer our prayers and gratitude. O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies who doth grace us with thousands upon thousands of lives to consume, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, I offer thanks and prayers to thee, and do take part in the meal so graciously provided.”

The pre-baptism children echoed my prayer, then instantly began devouring their lunch. Food was brought to the orphanage only after the adult priests and shrine maidens and then the apprentices had enjoyed their shares, so the orphans were made to wait longer than anyone else. Their hunger was clear from the ravenous fury with which they ate.

I did feel sorry for the children that they had to wait so long before every meal, but at the same time, I was overjoyed that they were now always guaranteed something to eat. Before, they had been entirely reliant on scraps, sometimes receiving nothing at all.

“Today’s food is wonderful, isn’t it?” I asked. I ate my meals with the other adults, so my duty here was to teach the children how to eat properly and clean up after themselves. There were six of them in total, and looking after them all at once was no easy feat.

“The soup’s good.”

“Do you think Lizzie helped today? Look at how neatly cut all these vegetables are.”

Whether the quantity of divine gifts one day was large or small, there would always be soup on the table for the children to eat. The soup itself seemed to embody everything that Sister Myne had done for the orphanage, so I always thought about her whenever I saw it.

“Sister Myne is the very reason we have this soup to begin with,” I explained. “She taught us how to make it, she allows us to gather ingredients from the forest, and she pays us for the paper we make so that we can buy whatever we need.”

“You aaalways tell us that, Wilma,” one of the children said.

“And now you’re gonna say, ‘Be grateful to Sister Myne.’”

The other children all nodded in agreement. They were teasing me, but I didn’t doubt that they really were appreciative of everything Sister Myne had done for them. She had cleansed them, given them food, and allowed them to experience the outside world.

It was the duty of gray priests and shrine maidens to clean the halls used by the blue priests—and, as the blue priests never visited the orphanage, our surroundings were left to grow dirtier by the day. This made it harder for us to keep ourselves clean, so we at least tried to maintain the places that were frequented most.

In short, the dining hall was never terribly unclean, nor were the rooms of the apprentices and the adults. The pre-baptism children weren’t quite as fortunate, however; they were customarily looked after by the gray shrine maidens who had given birth and would not leave the basement even for their meals, so most of us never saw or even really thought about them.

I couldn’t have been the only one who felt so shocked when Sister Myne’s attendant, Fran, revealed the awful state in which those children had been living. It had taken the intervention of someone outside the orphanage for us to realize that there were no

longer any shrine maidens in the basement and that the poor souls still inside were receiving barely any food from the apprentices.

“Wilma, can we go to the workshop when we’re done?” one child asked.

“Only after you’ve put your dishes away and washed your hands and face,” I replied. “Gil will scold you if you dirty the paper.”

“Lutz is scarier than Gil...”

I had heard all the stories about Gil yelling at the orphans in the workshop and kicking them out when he had to, but I didn’t know much about this Lutz boy aside from the fact that he was an apprentice merchant whom Sister Myne trusted completely.

“He always shouts things like ‘Do you know how much time and effort went into making even this one sheet of paper?!’” said one of the children as they continued their gossiping.

“He got mad at me the other day before I even touched anything!” another child, Rico, added. He put his hands on his hips and said in an exaggerated voice: “Do you lot know how much this stuff sells for?! Don’t touch the dang product with your dirty hands!”

The other kids laughed. “You sound just like him!”

I was honestly quite surprised to hear the children speaking as they were. Such harsh tones and crass language were never used in the temple.

“If we mess up the paper then he won’t let us go to the forest.”

“He got violent a little while ago! I tried to warn him that violence isn’t good, but he just said to blame whoever forces him to use it.”

To me, the Myne Workshop was a completely different world within the temple, operated on a blend of rules that reflected Sister Myne’s understanding of merchant and temple customs. Of course, I was basing this assumption entirely on the stories I’d overheard—my fear of men kept me from ever going to the workshop myself.

Though I must acknowledge that the orphanage is moving down a similar path thanks to Sister Myne’s influence as the orphanage director.

Cleaning the orphanage as we did the temple, making our own food so that we had enough for everyone, earning our own money so that we could support ourselves instead of relying on divine gifts... Sister Myne was teaching us all sorts of things that I could only assume came naturally to commoners.

Despite everything she had done for us, Sister Myne was always so humble. “I merely taught you *how* to improve your lives,” she would say. “The progress you have made is the result of your own hard work.” Perhaps that was true, but the temple was otherwise made up of nobles and orphans, none of whom could have taught us what to do.

I was so, so grateful that the gods had sent us Sister Myne. She praised me as a saint due to how I looked after the children, but I thought she was much more deserving of the title.

Although, considering her young age, perhaps she is less a saint and more the divine child of the gods.

I giggled to myself, then recalled what Sister Myne had said this morning while visiting the orphanage. We had spoken about Rosina, whom Sister Myne had also recently taken as an attendant.

Sister Christine, Rosina’s and my former mistress, had returned to the Noble’s Quarter some time ago. Despite this fact, Rosina still clung to her memory and principles as if we were still in her service. It made her very ill-suited to become the attendant of a commoner, especially when Sister Christine’s and Sister Myne’s expectations were so drastically different.

I’d made a request of Sister Myne, which she had said she would consider... but I was certain that Rosina would soon be returned to the orphanage.

Rosina was a genuine beauty—she had mature facial features, flowing chestnut hair, and blue eyes that shone like jewels. As a lover of all things beautiful, Sister Christine had adored all these things about her, but the two had gotten along so well because of more than just that; they were almost the same age and were equally as interested and proficient in the arts. Thus, after being separated from her family and sent to the temple, Sister Christine had treated Rosina as a true friend.

It was clear to me that Rosina was expecting the same treatment from Sister Myne, but she was being far too optimistic.

“It shouldn’t be long now...”

Sister Myne had said that she was going to consult all her attendants and then discuss matters with Rosina after lunch. It was likely to be a painful experience for Rosina if she did not accept the reality that she was no longer serving Sister Christine.

I sent the children off to the workshop and then went to my room, whereupon I took out the boards I was using to help make

karuta. The game was going to be Sister Myne's gift to the children, so I needed to be extra careful. My art would teach them the visages of the gods, so there was a lot of pressure, but it was such a worthwhile endeavor.

Sister Myne's karuta were wonderful indeed. They had originally been made for Gil to help him learn his letters, and he occasionally brought them to the dining hall for the other children to play with. Their effectiveness as a learning material was impossible to ignore; in what had felt like no time at all, the children had memorized the alphabet and the names of the gods.

Using the pen and ink that Sister Myne gave me, I carefully started drawing the gods and their divine instruments on the boards in front of me, which were smooth and polished to a sheen. I'd read the karuta so many times now that I could recite pretty much all of them by heart. The children knew them all too, so I could always ask for their help when necessary.

I enjoyed looking after the children, but the elation I felt while absorbed in my art was something truly special. It was like a reminder that I had been starved of my passion for much too long.

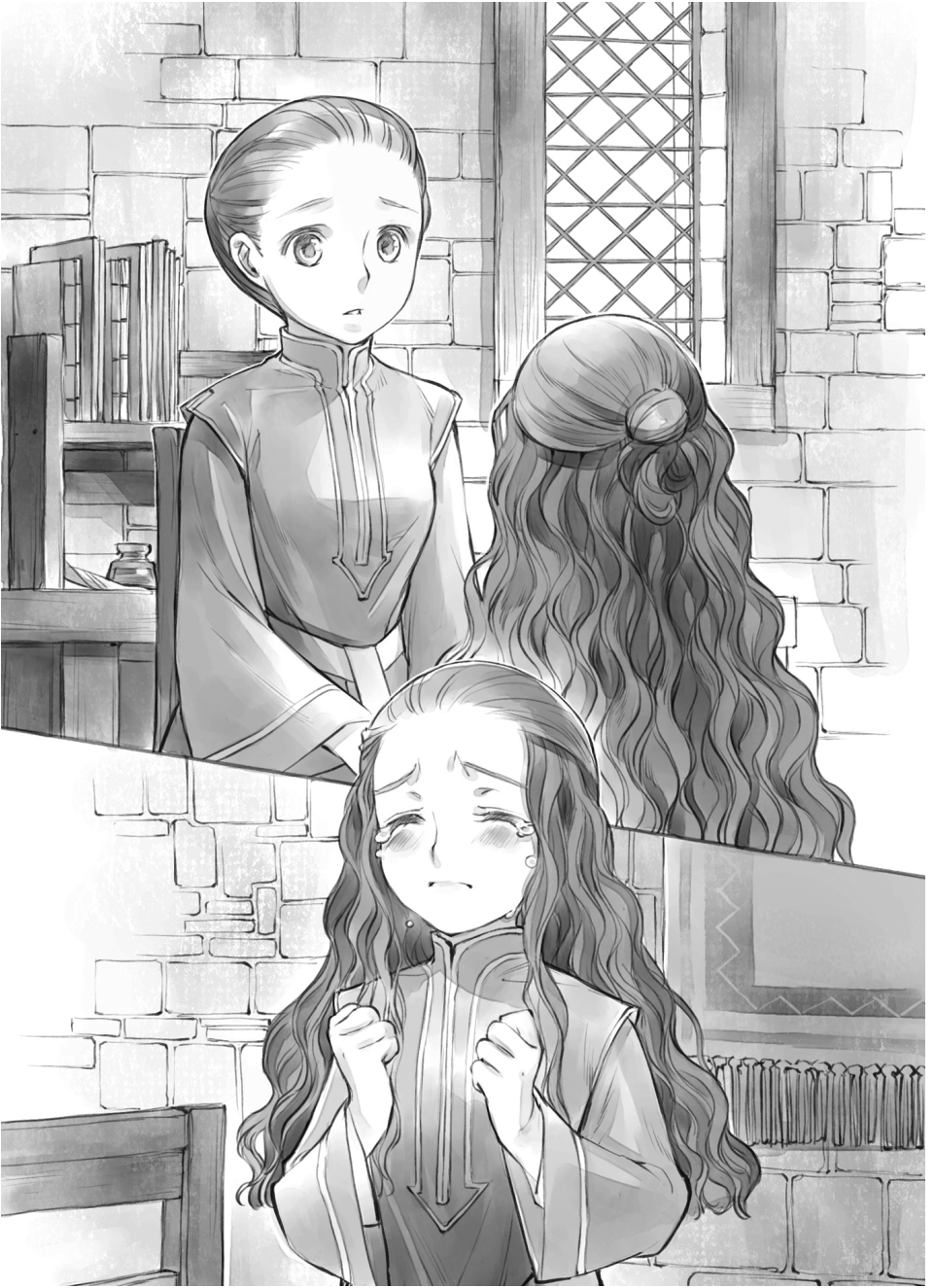
I was several illustrations into my work when there came a knock on my door. I called for my visitor to enter, and in came Rosina, entirely as I'd predicted. She closed the door behind herself... and then tears welled up in her blue eyes. This was my first time seeing her so emotional. Just how much had she been holding in?

"Wilma, Sister Myne is so cruel," Rosina complained. "She told me to do the work of a gray priest!"

"I'm not sure I follow... Tell me precisely what happened."

"Yes, of course. Please do listen. You are the only person who can understand me, Wilma. You also served Sister Christine, after all."

I stopped drawing and turned my chair around, prompting Rosina to take a seat on my bed. She immediately began to explain the situation, tears streaming down her face.



“Delia is the cruelest of all.”

“I am not familiar with all of Sister Myne’s attendants. Can you tell me more about her?”

Ever since becoming Sister Myne’s attendant, I spent almost all of my time holed up in the orphanage, so my knowledge of the outside world was limited to what the children told me during meals. Fran and Gil assisted in cleaning the orphanage as Sister Myne’s attendants and had been quite famous in the temple even before then, but this was my first time hearing the name “Delia.”

Rosina nodded in response to my question and said, “She’s a red-haired girl with a remarkably spirited personality. She also used to serve the High Bishop as an apprentice shrine maiden.”

She was eight years old, I was told, which meant she had been in the basement when Rosina and I were returned to the orphanage. Someone with red hair surely would have stood out in my mind, and yet...

“I would expect to remember this eight-year-old apprentice,” I said, “but I have no recollection of ever seeing her.”

“The High Bishop took her in immediately after her baptism, so she went straight from the basement to the noble section of the temple, skipping the first floor of the orphanage entirely. She told me as much when I said that I did not recognize her, and she sounded very proud of herself the entire time. She announced that she would one day become the High Bishop’s concubine, and without a hint of shame! Oh, what would Sister Christine have said upon hearing such a thing?”

Sister Christine had loathed the gray shrine maidens who gave flowers, even going as far as to call them talentless women who offered nothing to the world but their bodies. As a result, Rosina and I had come to oppose the idea of one day being taken by blue priests ourselves.

The other gray shrine maidens of the orphanage did not share our revulsion to flower offerings, however. Life had gotten harder over the past few years—labor was more demanding and divine gifts in shorter supply—and many saw giving flowers as a small price to pay to ensure they didn’t go hungry.

“Is it really so strange that a child who spent so long in the basement without any gray priests to care for her wishes to leave

the orphanage and live a stable life?" I asked. "Imagine if *you* had been locked down there."

"Oh, do not say such things, Wilma. The thought alone makes me queasy."

Rosina had been the first to run away when we were ordered to wash the children of the basement; she was undeniably taking after Sister Christine, who had always said that she wished to see nothing but beauty. I could not help but sigh when I thought about how different our previous mistress was from Sister Myne, who had sent Gil to save the children through any means necessary after coincidentally stumbling upon them.

"Delia has no sense of culture, does not understand art, and describes the sweet sounds of the harspiel as unpleasant to the ear!" Rosina continued. "*She* is unpleasant to the ear, always saying 'geez' this and 'geez' that! Oh, but Sister Myne did not scold her for her ignorance. Instead, she merely listened with a smile!"

In a sense, Rosina and Delia were quite similar: both had moved to the noble section of the temple without needing to endure any manual work. Such labor was a crucial part of serving as an apprentice attendant, however, which was presumably why Sister Myne had allowed Delia to continue uninterrupted.

"Furthermore, Delia spoke poorly of me to Sister Myne!" Rosina exclaimed. She went on to describe everything that Delia had said during their meeting and even stressed the things she had repeated, which made Delia's irritation and anger all the more apparent.

"How did the others respond to this?" I asked. "Did anyone come to your aid, or did they all support Delia?"

"The latter. Gil even began to spout such nonsense, saying that 'those who do not work shall not eat' and that I should not be playing music at night..."

If she was playing the harspiel as late into the night as Sister Christine had used to, then I could see why everyone was so displeased. Delia and Gil were both apprentices and presumably went to bed as early as the children of the orphanage.

"I can understand why they might find your playing a bother," I said. "If you played here in the orphanage while the children were trying to sleep, I would be very troubled."

"Wilma?!"

"Sister Christine was always late to rise, but those in Sister Myne's chambers are up as early as we are in the orphanage, are

they not?"

Rosina looked slightly downcast; she had probably heard that same argument once already.

"That aside," I continued, "I seem to recall that Gil was once considered an uncontrollable problem child. He certainly seems to have changed, does he not?"

The most I really remembered about Gil was how often the gray priest who oversaw cleaning in the temple had sent him to the repentance chamber. Everyone in the orphanage had doubted their ears when it was revealed that he was being made the attendant of a blue shrine maiden.

"Oh, Wilma. You wouldn't have believed your eyes if you had been there to see him kneeling and receiving praise."

I remembered thinking he was mesmerized by Sister Myne the last time I saw him. She *had* given him karuta, so they presumably got along very well indeed.

"Well, what did Fran say?" I asked. "He used to serve the High Priest, so he must have viewed things from a more professional standpoint than the young apprentices."

It was common knowledge to those of us in the orphanage that Fran had previously served the High Priest and was now tasked with teaching and guiding Sister Myne, who had grown up a commoner. He was also the only adult gray priest among her attendants, and it was clear at a glance how much she trusted and relied on him.

"Fran is a gray priest, but he does not follow my instructions in the least," Rosina replied. "He won't do manual work either, and—can you believe it—he even gives *me* orders."

"Is it not obvious that he would...?"

"Oh? And why is that?"

Rosina looked genuinely confused. If she truly was this blind to the reality of her situation, then it was little wonder that she had earned the ire of Sister Myne's attendants. It was no wonder Sister Myne came to me for my opinion on her.

"Fran is Sister Myne's head attendant, whereas you are a new apprentice."

"But I play the harspiel, and—"

"Rosina, Sister Myne is not Sister Christine. You cannot expect your life to return to what it once was."

"Sister Myne said the same thing..."

“What else did she say?”

“That I should stop playing music after seventh bell, so as not to bother the others. She also said that she would allow me to do paperwork instead of manual labor, as she understands that my hands are important for playing music.”

“Paperwork?” I repeated.

Rosina gave a big nod. “Sister Myne has too few attendants. Thus, she has entrusted Fran with her paperwork, Gil with overseeing the workshop and the boys’ building of the orphanage, and Delia with the upkeep of her chambers.”

“She certainly does sound short-staffed...”

Normally, an attendant’s only duty was to manage the lifestyle of the person they served—but Sister Myne was both the orphanage director and the forewoman of the Myne Workshop. Her obligations were too broad in scope for a mere three people to manage.

“Your duties are looking after the girls’ building and doing art, correct?” Rosina asked me. “Sister Myne said she cannot afford for me to do nothing but play music—that I must take on other jobs as well.”

Rosina was almost an adult; of course it would be problematic if she was incapable of doing the work expected of all good attendants.

“So, what kind of paperwork are you being asked to do?” I asked.

“She wishes for me to write letters on her behalf and oversee ledgers for her chambers and the workshop. In essence, I am to lessen Fran’s burden.”

“Well... Delia and Gil would struggle to do that kind of work, as they have just become attendants and still cannot read or write. Sister Myne must think you are a better candidate, considering that you are educated and almost of age.”

I sighed, feeling as if my own flaws were staring me in the face. Upon becoming an attendant, one started learning how to read, write, and do math. But while those of us who had served Sister Christine could argue over who had the most beautiful handwriting or could write the most touching poems, we had no experience doing formal paperwork. We were also lacking when it came to math, meaning we could provide very little assistance on that front. Truly, we were attendants who specialized only in the arts.

“If she wishes to ease Fran’s burden, then she could simply take

on more attendants,” Rosina said. “Instead, she wants me to learn things I do not understand and am incapable of doing. In her own words, she does not need an attendant who will not work.”

“That does not surprise me. Sister Christine may have been a noble, but Sister Myne is a commoner; I cannot see her having enough money to hire more than ten attendants.”

She had deliberately taught the pre-baptism children to *earn* their food. Someone who held such a belief surely did not have the funds to hire as many attendants as she needed.

“Sister Myne is a blue shrine maiden, is she not? I find it hard to believe that—”

“Sister Christine was unique. The blue priests in the temple today have only five attendants at most.”

It was normal to hire three to five attendants, as well as chefs and servants. In contrast, Sister Christine’s retinue had included two servants from her home, six gray shrine maidens for enjoying the arts, four gray priests for manual labor and administrative work, several chefs and helpers, and various tutors. Using her as a baseline was just plain unrealistic.

“Rosina, could it be that you are just not suited to serving Sister Myne?” I asked. “Given all the areas in which you disagree, I imagine that neither party is going to be satisfied with this arrangement.”

“Would you tell me to return to the orphanage as well, Wilma?”

I felt a sudden pang in my chest. Sister Myne had suggested that Rosina leave her service... I’d expected something like that to happen.

“Your thoughts and deeds are so contradictory to Sister Myne’s,” I said. “She must believe that she has no other choice.”

“I can choose between returning to the orphanage or accepting a lifestyle that is nothing like the one we had with Sister Christine. Sister Myne told me to decide by tomorrow.”

“I see. Then the rest depends on you, Rosina.” If, as I suspected, Sister Myne had been so lenient as a result of my request, then there was nothing more I could say. It was up to Rosina to make her choice.

“Wilma... do you not think it a mistake to have a shrine maiden do the work of a gray priest?” Rosina asked as she saw me return to my drawing. I could tell she was troubled that I hadn’t sided with her, even considering our similar histories.

"I do not, no. Sister Christine was the only person who maintained that rule."

"Then I must be the one who is mistaken..."

After leaving the orphanage, Rosina had only ever known life under Sister Christine. Even now, she longed to return to those halcyon days. It was understandably painful to be refused the things one cherished so dearly, but Sister Christine was never going to return to the temple, and the attitude she had promoted wasn't applicable elsewhere.

"I wouldn't say that, Rosina. My point is that Sister Christine's rules apply only to those in her service. Now that you are working for Sister Myne, *her* rules apply instead."

"So... my perspective... doesn't apply...?"

"Consider your situation carefully. If you had been taken by a blue priest rather than by Sister Myne, then you might not even have been given an instrument. You might have been made to offer flowers. Would you have expressed your dissatisfaction then?"

In a situation like that, her fate would already be sealed. Nothing would come of an apprentice gray shrine maiden telling a blue priest that she did not want to go anywhere without an instrument or that she was too cultured to offer flowers.

"Sister Myne has not forbidden you from playing music at all, has she?" I continued. "She said only that she cannot afford for you to play music all day and that you need to do the same work the other attendants are doing. She even showed you some consideration by saying that you could focus on paperwork instead of doing manual labor. Above all else, did you not vow to serve Sister Myne from the bottom of your heart? Or were you merely paying lip service?"

It was easy to sever ties with an attendant who did not meet your expectations, but it seemed to me that Sister Myne was compromising as much as she possibly could.

"Sister Myne has already gone to great lengths to make you feel more comfortable," I said. "If you are still not satisfied, then I expect you will only ever be happy with Sister Christine. It would be best for you to return to the orphanage before you trouble anyone further."

Rosina stared at me in a daze, looking entirely defeated. Tears began to well up in her eyes as she gazed downward and mumbled, "I see now that, even after becoming the attendant of an apprentice

shrine maiden, I cannot return to those days...”

“Indeed. Nobody else can become Sister Christine.”

She hung her head and started to weep quietly. It was best to leave her be, I thought, so I simply continued with my illustrations while she let out her pent-up emotions. Eventually, her tears would dry on their own.

After a while, Rosina finally looked up again. “Wilma...” she said, her eyes now brimming with resolve. “I would like to have as much music in my life as possible. That is why I shall return to Sister Myne and learn to do the tasks she gives me.”

Rosina had clung to the past for such a long time, but now here she was, facing the future at last. It was such an extraordinarily beautiful sight that I regretted not having the means to paint it.

“Sister Myne will appreciate your efforts to improve, just as she rewarded those who worked hard in the orphanage. There is not much more I can do for you than listen to your woes, but I wish you all the success in the world.”

Several days later, Sister Myne arrived at the orphanage wearing a radiant smile. She was an apprentice shrine maiden, but she could almost be mistaken for the pre-baptism children.

“You spoke to Rosina, didn’t you, Wilma?” she asked. “Though she does not seem particularly fond of the work, she is trying her best even at math. Thank you.”

There was so much joy in her golden eyes, and she looked so innocent and adorable that, were I not in her service, I might have embraced her as I did the children. She was a commoner, and that was precisely the reason she felt so much like the rest of us. It was not that she lacked elegance—far from it—but rather that she lacked the forcefulness and high-minded dignity of a purebred noble like Sister Christine.

“Sister Myne, it is my understanding that the High Priest assigned Rosina to you so that you might receive a cultural education,” I said. “There may not be any blue shrine maidens in the temple for you to learn from, but Rosina is the next best alternative; she was treated as Sister Christine’s friend and educated alongside her. And if she is working hard to overcome her dislikes, then perhaps you can do the same and accept your noble education.”

Sister Myne faltered, her eyes flitting about the room. As

someone who stood above others, it was unacceptable for her to show weakness so openly.

“Sister Myne, when you and your attendants were all gathered for your discussion, did Rosina avert her gaze? Did she cast her eyes down and weep when nobody took her side?”

“No... She kept looking ahead and clearly stated her opinion,” Sister Myne replied, blinking at me in confusion. It was cute, but that didn’t make it okay.

“Indeed. She carried herself like a proper noble. Only when she came to me in private did she cry and allow her true emotions to show.”

“And... I must become like Rosina?” Sister Myne asked, looking up at me and pursing her lips. I noticed the same resolve in her eyes as I had seen in Rosina’s.

“If a gray shrine maiden raised in the temple can carry herself as nobles do, then so can you. Do your best to learn from Rosina’s behavior.”

“Right...”

I can only hope that Rosina and Sister Myne will be a good influence on one another.

That was my wish as I offered my prayers to the gods.

Gunther — I'm Not Givin' Up My Daughter!

An original short story written as a 2015 order bonus for the online store Animate, set around the time of Part 2 Volume 1. A troubled Gunther, upset that Myne's position as an apprentice shrine maiden is keeping her from visiting the gate, is reminded that he's not the only one feeling her absence.

Author's Note: Leckle also appears in the Part 4 Volume 4 chapter "Preventing Destructive Reconstruction." To those of you eager to know what he was like when he was a little less mature, here you are!

"How's your daughter, Captain?"

Leckle stopped me at the gate on my way to my shift. From what I knew, he was better than average at math, and Myne's crazy work had really inspired him to improve. These reasons were why Otto had him pinned as his replacement. Otto had decided that he was going to quit being a soldier in a few years' time to actually start working as a member of a merchant family.

"Who's asking?" I shot back. "I'm not gonna let you marry either of 'em."

"What are you even talking about...? They're a decade too young for me to even consider that. Gah, let me get back on track. I'm asking since we haven't seen Myne at the gate all summer. I've been stuck helping Otto all alone."

Otto's style was to off-load his work on anyone capable of doing it, and Leckle was the only one good enough at math to make a good replacement. He normally got Myne to do the double-checking work when she came by, but that wasn't happening anymore—the temple had completely stolen her away. Otto was understandably

devastated. Nobody could have seen it coming.

“A rich merchant hired Myne to work in his store,” I explained. “She’s doing math for him, so she doesn’t have time to waste here at the gate. Also, don’t forget how weak she is.” We weren’t telling anyone that Myne had joined the temple; instead, we were saying she was being looked after by the Gilberta Company. It wasn’t entirely untrue—she and Lutz were going there to sell the weird things they were making together.

“Man, it’s been rough lately...” Leckle sighed. “Otto just keeps comparing me to your daughter.”

Myne was crazy smart—that was what people told me, at least. I personally wasn’t sure how to measure something like that. What I did know was that Otto had turned down more helpers than I could count, each time groaning that “teaching idiots is a waste of time.” And after just a brief moment with Myne, that same man had practically begged me to let her be his assistant.

I was well aware Myne had negotiated with Otto, then earned the approval of a rich merchant and secured a position under him as an apprentice. Her achievements hadn’t stopped there either—now that she was in the temple, she was serving as the orphanage director and giving the High Priest a hand with his work. I didn’t know what made someone smart, but I did know my daughter was pretty up there.

“Heh. Yeah, the gods sure do love my daughter. She’s special, unlike you.”

But her being special was why the temple had gone after her in the first place. There were times now when I kind of resented the gods.

“Gahhh. You always exaggerate, Captain, but she really is special. And I really hate being compared to her.”

I could hardly blame him there. It must have been miserable staring at boards and paperwork while the other soldiers were training and standing guard. Myne and Otto were two of the rare few who actually liked that kind of work. If someone told me to do math all day, I’d want to quit my job for sure.

“It’s not right for Otto to force all the work onto you, Leckle. I’ll tell him to train some other soldiers too.”

I’ll also try asking Myne if she knows any good tricks for teaching others...

Effa had mentioned that Myne tutored Lutz in math and reading

over the winter to help him become an apprentice merchant. He'd apparently made a lot of progress in just one season.

When I spoke to Myne, the first thing she said was that I needed to look for someone who likes paperwork the same as Otto.

"You'll want to find someone who lacks stamina and wants to do nothing but bookwork, like me. Guards brimming with passion for building muscle and protecting the city will never be good at paperwork; I'm sure they struggle enough with finding motivation to study. At the end of the day, you can't force people to learn. It'd be nice if you could just hire gray priests, since they're good at math and used to dealing with nobles, but oh well..."

Gray priests could most likely get a job at the gate with my recommendation, but they didn't know anything about life out here. They lived in a completely separate world, and the last thing I needed was to look after a bunch of guys who didn't even know enough about the lower city to buy from stalls.

"As useful as their skills sound, hiring them seems pretty dang tough..." I murmured, remembering how their eyes would dart all over the place as they walked through the city, and the way they'd recoil from shouts and arguments. They weren't bad people, but they couldn't work at the gate even if they were doing nothing but paperwork. The lower city would eat them alive.

Myne smiled. "It might not be possible now, but I hope that in ten or twenty years, it becomes normal for orphans to leave the temple. Maybe they could even seek employment in the lower city."

She was wearing the expression of an orphanage director thinking about her orphans' futures, and I could suddenly feel the vast gap that had opened up between us. She was getting absorbed into the temple—into a world I couldn't enter. I instinctively pulled her into a tight hug.

I'm not givin' up my daughter! Not to the temple or the gods!

Tuuli — Studying Literature and Picture Books

An original short story written for a TO Books crossover in 2016, set around the time of Part 2 Volume 2. After helping Myne put together a picture-book bible from the temple, Tuuli decides that she wants to learn to read. She starts practicing on a stone slate, but progress is slow.

Author's Note: Tuuli gets really weirded out by Myne's perception of value, and understandably so! Money is regarded very differently in the lower city.

“But... give me a book for helping, please. I want to learn to read too,” I said, having worked up the courage after Myne asked me to help sew together some pages. I would be going to the orphanage more and more, and the last thing I wanted was to feel like the only person in the world who couldn't read and write.

I mean, not knowing how to read is supposed to be normal, but everyone I know seems to be able to read and write.

Myne could do both, of course. Even Dad could, since he worked as a guard. It used to be that he couldn't write very well even though he knew how to read, but when he found out Myne had started to learn from Otto, he had taken up studying on his own to maintain his pride as a father.

Lutz had learned to read just last winter, having been taught by Myne so he could become an apprentice merchant, but now he was good enough to read contracts like they were nothing at all. It was so impressive that Mrs. Karla bragged about it all the time. Mrs. Corinna also knew how to write, since she made notes on the boards she used for work. With my aim being to one day join her workshop, I'd need to learn to read and write too.

And above all else, I didn't want Myne and Lutz to leave me behind.

"This is a slate pen. You hold it like this. Oh, not like that, Tuuli. You can't grip it like that," Myne said.

My lessons started with me holding a white slate pen and trying to draw lines on the stone slate in front of me. Learning to write actual letters was apparently still a bit too advanced for me right now.

I held the pen as Myne instructed and tried drawing a line just as she demonstrated, but for some reason, I couldn't put enough force into it. The line wasn't even remotely straight either. It was weird, thin, and wobbled around all over the place.

"Just like there's a right way to hold a needle, there's a right way to hold a pen," Myne explained. "You can draw lines no matter how you hold them, but if you don't learn to hold them correctly, you'll smash their tips to pieces."

I kept drawing lines, making sure I was holding the pen in the way that made it hard to use force, but they still didn't end up straight. Myne was doing it so easily too.



“Keep trying no matter how much you’re struggling,” she said. “If you can’t draw straight lines or smooth curves, you won’t be able to sketch clothing designs.”

I was even having to practice reading letters in between writing sessions.

“Once you’ve memorized the spoken text, follow along the letters with your eyes. Soon enough you’ll be able to write them yourself. You’ve still got a long time before you need to go to Corinna’s workshop, so you don’t need to rush as Lutz did.”

“But it still took Lutz over half a year, right? I want to ask to move to Mrs. Corinna’s workshop, so I can’t waste any time.”

Lehange contracts lasted three years, and any arrangements to move workshops needed to be made in advance. That only gave me a year of wiggle room at most.

“A year is more than enough. You should try to actually enjoy the process too,” Myne said with a smile. “If you start to hate books and letters, you’ll never pick up any of this stuff. Mr. Otto’s struggling right now because all the apprentices who were forced into learning aren’t remembering a thing.” As she spoke, she spread out the pages of the bible picture book for kids.

“‘The God of Darkness spent a staggeringly long time alone,’” she read, tracing her finger along the words so that I could follow along. The pure joy in her expression was unmistakable, and there was a sparkle in her golden, moonlike eyes.

“‘The God of Darkness spent a staggeringly long time alone.’” I repeated the words to myself, watching as Myne more or less melted with bliss. I couldn’t recognize the letters yet, so the most I could do was repeat what she said.

“Right, right. Good. Next line. ‘The Goddess of Light appeared next to the solitary God of Darkness, brightening his surroundings with light.’”

In the story, the God of Darkness and the Goddess of Light met and got married. They then had four children: the Goddess of Water, the God of Fire, the Goddess of Wind, and the Goddess of Earth.

“‘The first to be born was Flutrane the Goddess of Water. Flutrane has the power to heal and purify.’”

I continued repeating the contents of the book back to Myne.

Once we were done, I returned to drawing lines on the slate.

“Great,” Myne said. “Now that you can draw lines that smoothly, I think you can move on to writing letters.”

After much practice drawing individual lines, I finally started to learn actual letters. Myne first taught me to write my name.

“You’ll be using your name the most, after all. Lutz had to write his on a contract when he joined the Gilberta Company. If you want to join Corinna’s workshop, you’ll probably have to do the same.”

“Wait, really?! You should have said that earlier!”

Drawing lines was hard enough, so it made sense that memorizing all the letters was even harder. Lutz had memorized them all over the winter, but I wasn’t sure I could manage that in time for when I needed to ask Mrs. Corinna whether I could join her workshop. I was getting super, super nervous.

I wrote my name while carefully looking at the example Myne had provided. She went on to teach me her own name, the names of everyone in our family, the names of my friends, Mrs. Corinna’s name, and how to write “the Gilberta Company.”

“Oh, Lutz is here,” Myne said. “I need to get going.” She was heading to the temple almost every day for winter preparations, and unlike most apprentices, she didn’t get every other day off.

She really is going there as much as she can, even though she gets sick and bedridden so often.

I kept, um... “transcribing” the text from the picture book, at Myne’s instruction. A short while later, I heard a quiet *thud*. I looked up and saw Mom with her big belly setting a cup of water on the table.

“I see you’re working hard, honey.”

“This is super hard. It’s crazy that Lutz learned all these over the winter, but it’s even crazier that Myne learned them all while helping with math at the gate.”

I wasn’t exactly sure when it had happened, but Myne had mentioned helping Mr. Otto teach the apprentices at the gate. In other words, she was already educating others less than a year after she had gone there for the first time. I hadn’t really understood it at the time, but now I knew how impossible that really was.

“Ahaha. That reminds me of when I was a little girl. My father made me help out at the gate too.”

“Your father, Mom? You mean Granddad?”

“That’s right. He was a gate commander. You know how nobles sometimes have meetings at that one soldier meeting room? He taught me to prepare tea and speak properly there. He never taught me my letters though, since I didn’t have any real use for them.”

Granddad and Grandma were both gone now. Mom didn’t talk about them much.

“If Myne had kept helping out at the gate and doing her writing at home instead of going to the temple, I’m sure she would’ve been taught to prepare tea for meetings, just as I was.”

“Mm... I can’t see Myne actually managing to boil water properly...” I mused aloud. She couldn’t even draw water from the well yet, let alone make tea. Mom and I couldn’t help but laugh as we tried to picture it, but it wasn’t long before my eyes dropped back down to the slate. “Mom, want to learn letters too? We can learn at the same time.”

“I’m a bit busy making the baby’s clothes and diapers, so maybe another day. You can teach me in the winter if we have the time.”

“Wait, you want me to teach you?” I asked, blinking in surprise.

“Mm-hmm,” Mom replied with a mischievous smile. “Be sure to learn well so you can help me out.”

“Okay! I’ll do my best!”

I was so happy to know Mom was willing to rely on me that I felt even more motivated than before. And so, with a fire lit under me, I worked even harder at studying... until a certain question came to mind.

Just how much is this book worth, anyway?

I knew the hairpins I made were being sold at a high price, so when Myne came back from the temple, contemplating about the next one, I took the opportunity to ask about the book.

“Umm... We made it in the workshop, so the base cost isn’t very high... but I guess it would go for about one small gold and eight large silvers in a store?”

“Whaaat?!”

I recoiled in surprise, my eyes flitting between Myne and the picture book. I couldn’t believe she had brought something so valuable home with her, and it was almost unthinkable that she wanted to make even more of them.

“I want to make them a little more affordable, but plant paper is still expensive, and ink is a real bottleneck... With Benno being so forceful about securing profit, I imagine it’ll be a while before the

price goes down.”

Myne seemed focused on how to reduce the price, but that wasn't at all what I had meant. “This isn't something we should be keeping here at home, right? I shouldn't be studying with something so expensive!”

“What? What are you talking about, Tuuli...? I made it as an educational resource to help children learn to read,” Myne said. She looked utterly confused, but I was the one who was really bewildered.

Myne apparently wasn't bothered about leaving something worth almost two small golds here in the house, and she was fine with letting both me and the soon-to-be-born baby use it. I had never thought the picture book was worth so much money. The blood drained from my face when I thought about how carelessly I had been handling it.

“U-Um, Myne... Can books be washed...?”

“No! Tuuli! Don't wash the book! The paper will get ruined if you soak it in water! Don't wash it no matter what!”

“Oh... Then how do you clean it when it gets dirty?” I glanced at the book and noticed there were already some white smears on its pages from the dust of my slate pen. That sent a jolt of panic through me, but Myne just gave a casual smile.

“It's best not to get them dirty in the first place, but it doesn't really matter that much if you do. Really, don't worry about it.”

“How can I not worry when they're so expensive?!” I exclaimed. At this point, I was scared to even touch the picture book.

What should I do?! I shouldn't have asked for one of my own!

Rihyarda — My New Lady

A previously unpublished chapter that takes place between Part 2 Volume 4 and Part 3 Volume 1, and was originally posted online as part of a collection of disconnected short stories. After imprisoning

Veronica and throwing the castle into chaos, Sylvester sends Rihyarda a summons. He wants her to serve Rozemyne, his soon-to-be adopted daughter!

Author's Note: We received a lot of very passionate requests for a Rihyarda short story. As a result, to celebrate the release of Part 3 Volume 4, I wrote this chapter about the events leading up to her becoming Rozemyne's head attendant.

In an event that shook Ehrenfest to its very core, Lord Sylvester imprisoned his own mother, Lady Veronica. He had disappeared from the Archduke Conference with his guard, the knight commander Lord Karstedt, in tow.

Everything had come so suddenly that not even Lord Sylvester's own retainers had expected it. The castle was now in chaos—understandably so—and it was in the midst of this turmoil that I received a summons from Lord Sylvester.

I stared at the yellow feystone which had just moments ago been an ordonnanz. “What in the world does he wish to discuss with me?” I wondered aloud.

“Rihyarda, learn as much as you can of the aub's intentions. We cannot do our jobs properly if the situation remains so unpredictable.”

It was obvious why the other retainers were so concerned: at no point prior to the event had Lord Sylvester suggested that he might carry out such an act, and without consulting any of them.

Considering that Lord Karstedt had already known the plan, that the incident had occurred in the temple of all places, and that

the Knight's Order had moved as swiftly as it did, we could predict that Lady Veronica's imprisonment was part of a hidden plot between Lord Sylvester, Lord Karstedt, and my boy Ferdinand... but some things were not to be done in secret.

I will need to scold all three of them. "Put more thought into how your actions will impact those around you!"

It was true that Lady Veronica should never have used the aub's seal without permission and for personal gain, and perhaps it was natural that she be punished for it. The problem was that Lord Sylvester had laid none of the required groundwork. He had escalated the situation by involving a noble from another duchy and subsequently thrown Ehrenfest into chaos. A lecture on finding more elegant solutions was definitely needed.

"Lord Sylvester, it is Rihyarda," I called. "I have arrived at your summons."

I entered the room to find that it had already been cleared of everyone except Lord Karstedt, Lady Elvira, and Lord Sylvester himself. A sound-blocking magic tool was handed to me, revealing that this was an *extraordinarily* secretive discussion... and what I was told next made me doubt my ears.

"You are adopting a daughter?!"

"That's right. Karstedt's daughter, to be precise. She's due to be baptized this summer."

"Lord Karstedt does not have a daughter, does he?" I asked, looking between him and Lady Elvira. "Or could this be a child that even I am unaware of...?"

Lord Karstedt put on an unassuming expression and said, "She's the daughter of my deceased third wife, Rozemary." It was a lie. As the woman who had raised him, I could tell in an instant.

"Lady Rihyarda, her origin does not matter," Lady Elvira said. "She will become my daughter upon being baptized." Her expression was stiff, but the resolve in her eyes made it clear that this decision had reached a level that could no longer be contested.

Still, as Lord Sylvester's former nurse and educator, I needed to query him on these matters. There were few who could question the aub directly.

"Lord Sylvester, would you throw the castle into even further chaos? Put more thought into how your actions will impact those around you. Rather than adopting a daughter now, you should be thinking about Lord Wilfried, who was raised by Lady Veronica,

and what recent developments mean for him. If you are intending to adopt a daughter to strengthen his position, can that not wait until they are about to enter the Royal Academy?"

Lord Sylvester already had three children with Lady Florencia, and it was clear as day that adopting a Leisegang noble here and now would throw the nobility into further disarray. The current state of disorder needed to be dealt with first.

"Tell me, what did Lady Florencia say about adopting a daughter now of all times?" I asked.

"The same thing as you," Lord Sylvester replied. "She demanded to know what I was thinking—and she wasn't nice about it. But the decision to adopt is final. I won't be changing my mind." His dark-green eyes weren't wavering in the slightest.

I was well aware that once Lord Sylvester made a decision, he couldn't be stopped. He was pursuing this adoption even against the wishes of his beloved Lady Florencia, so what hope did I have of changing his mind? My only option at this point was to learn as much about the subject as I could in the hope of minimizing the damage.

"I see... Then let me ask, what manner of girl is this soon-to-be daughter of yours? For you to be adopting her at the height of such a turbulent period, there must be something special about her." I made sure to put my hands on my hips as I asked, and fixed Lord Sylvester with a glare that said, "Don't even think about lying."

Lord Sylvester paused for a moment, then glanced at Lord Karstedt. "She's rich with mana, has knowledge from the world of the gods, and is even considered the Saint of Ehrenfest."

"Be serious, please."

"I am. She boasts enough mana to increase crop yields all across the Central District and is bringing new industries to Ehrenfest. It's already been decided that she will be made the new High Bishop, with Ferdinand supporting her as the High Priest. She was raised in the temple, however, so she isn't the slightest bit knowledgeable about the ways of noble society. That's why I want you... to be her head attendant."

"You are adopting a girl who was raised in the temple *and* making her the High Bishop?!" I exclaimed, feeling light-headed in the face of Lord Sylvester's blasé attitude. "If you have this child enter the castle, she will need to endure great disdain and merciless rumors. You must understand that much. And the very idea of

putting a girl who has yet to be baptized through such misery... Lord Karstedt, this is your own daughter! Is it not your duty to protect her?!"

Just thinking about how unstable her position was going to be—and about all the nobles who would treat her with such contempt—sent a chill down my spine. But no matter how fiercely I barked, Lord Sylvester and Lord Karstedt simply exchanged glances. They showed no signs of budging.

"The fact is, Rihyarda," Lord Karstedt began, "there are things that Rozemyne can only protect through this adoption, no matter how much it hurts her or how merciless the nobles may be."

Lord Sylvester continued, "Rozemyne chose to be adopted to protect what she cares about; I won't tell her to abandon it all when she's already come so far. Even keeping her in the temple as the High Bishop is for her own sake. It's better for her to have something tying her there... or at least, that was what Ferdinand said."

From their statements, I was able to draw a few conclusions: this girl was trying to protect something—or someone—in the temple, and this thing or person she treasured so deeply had been intimately involved in the recent incident there. As many understood it, an archnoble from another duchy had caused a stir. This child presumably needed the status of an archducal family member to resolve the matter smoothly.

"Rihyarda, on top of all the ills of the world, she has Ferdinand as her guardian," Lord Sylvester stressed. "There's no one else I can trust with this job. Can I count on you?"

My boy Ferdinand received cruel abuse at the hands of Lady Veronica, and there were few to whom he could entrust someone under his protection. In this situation, I was the only person who met all of the necessary conditions. I was at the behest of the archduke, a natural pick for looking after Lord Karstedt's daughter, and someone my boy Ferdinand could rely on.

"Understood," I said. "I shall accept this duty."

"This means you'll have looked after two consecutive generations, Rihyarda," Lord Karstedt remarked with a smile. "Thank you."

Lady Elvira looked just as relieved and added, "I thank you ever so much, Lady Rihyarda."

Their expressions made their worry for this young lady coming

to the castle all too clear. I would need to do everything in my power to ensure the temple child was as safe in the castle as possible.

“Lady Elvira, there is no need to be so formal with me,” I said. “Please just call me ‘Rihyarda’ from now on. I am going to be your daughter’s attendant, after all.”

Lady Rozemyne’s adoption was going to take place during the upcoming summer baptism, so we retainers were all very busy preparing her chambers. For children of the archduke raised in the castle, this process was done gradually as an opportunity for them to get used to using their retinue. Lady Rozemyne’s situation was unique, however. We would not have enough time to prepare her room if we waited until she arrived at the castle, so we needed the help of her mother Lady Elvira to be ready when it became time to welcome her.

“Lady Elvira, might you tell me Lady Rozemyne’s preferences?” I asked.

“She seems to have grown to like her current chambers, so something of the same style would be preferable. Perhaps it will bring her some relief.”

“Ah, she is still midway through her education. What kind of girl is she? I ask for your thoughts because the opinions of men simply cannot be trusted on these matters.”

Lord Sylvester and Lord Karstedt only ever told me that Lady Rozemyne was “an exceedingly intelligent and equally as strange child.” It was more than just that “Saint of Ehrenfest” tomfoolery, but I still didn’t have a firm grasp on her character.

“Just as Lord Ferdinand warned, Rozemyne was unable to carry herself as an archnoble when she first came to our home. Since then, however, she has grown with startling speed. She has tremendous focus, and her teachers and I regularly find ourselves speechless. If she continues at her current pace, it will soon be impossible to tell that she was raised in the temple before her baptism.”

“A hard worker with excellent skills, then.”

“Indeed. Cornelius seems to find her presence somewhat inspiring—there is no mistaking the oddness of her character. Perhaps because she was raised in the temple, the way she approaches situations is very different from what one would

normally expect. At times, it is hard to tell what is running through her mind. If you pay very close attention, the logic on which she operates becomes clear... but it can be very difficult to unearth."

It seemed that Lord Sylvester's vague phrasing had not been an attempt at deception; as he said, Lady Rozemyne was a very talented, very diligent, and very *strange* girl who was nonetheless a hard worker. But what I found most surprising was that Lady Elvira had found out so much about her over such a short period, and her countenance was becoming more motherly by the day.

"I can tell from your words and the look on your face that you truly care for her," I said. "It seems you have grown quite invested in this child, even though she is not your own."

"The atmosphere of our estate has changed considerably since Rozemyne arrived. As I see it, she is my very adorable daughter. Especially since Lord Ferdinand is so very concerned for her." Lady Elvira gave a refined laugh before elaborating.

"He visits her *every couple of days*?" I repeated.

"Indeed. It has been every three, on occasion, but he always comes without fail. He eats dinner with us, questions her tutors about her progress, asks her whether there is anything she is struggling with, and then checks on her health. One might very well say he is taking Karstedt's place in these respects. I was aware of Lord Ferdinand protecting Rozemyne, but I never would have imagined that he would check up on her so often."

From the sound of things, Lady Rozemyne was rather attached to Ferdinand and relied on him considerably. It was certainly hard to believe. My boy had always kept his guard up around others, never allowing anyone to get close... yet here he was, being so openly considerate?

"To think he would be so attentive to a young child..." I said. "Just what did Lady Rozemyne do to lower the barriers around his heart?"

"Perhaps it is simply because she is so young and frail. She would die without a watchful eye looking over her, so he naturally filled the role." Lady Elvira went on to explain how often Lady Rozemyne became unwell; then she fell silent, placed a hand on her cheek, and sighed. "She is an exceptionally good girl. Severing her remaining ties to the temple and raising her as a normal noble would be ideal, but Lord Sylvester, Lord Karstedt, and Lord Ferdinand are all against it. I cannot help but feel they want her to

have some critical weakness to ensure that one of Lady Florencia's children becomes the next aub."

One could assume Lady Elvira was saying that, without some such weakness, Lady Rozemyne had a chance at becoming the next aub. For a female archduke candidate to attain that seat over men with a similar claim to it, she and her husband would need to be extraordinarily talented to overcome the unique disadvantages that female aubs inherently faced. It was not something I could easily swallow after seeing Lady Georgine weep at the unfairness of gender disparity.

"Lady Florencia has another son," I noted. "One not raised by Lady Veronica."

"Yes, I am aware. Lady Florencia consulted me for advice regarding raising boys when he was born, you know. But a daughter belonging to Lord Karstedt and me will have the full support of the Leisegangs. Those whom Lady Veronica abused will rise up in full force and put Lady Rozemyne in a position to become the next aub, if she so desires it."

I could tell that Lady Elvira was concerned about there being a battle for the seat of the archduke, but I smiled and shook my head. "I trust that Lord Sylvester and the others gave this situation a lot of very careful thought before deciding on the adoption. Ehrenfest's first wife has borne more than one son; Lady Rozemyne will never become the next aub."

"I wish I could share your confidence, for Lady Florencia's sake, but Lady Rozemyne is so abnormal and extraordinary that I find myself wondering what kind of an upbringing she must have had. It is almost uncanny."

"Well, she is receiving an education from my boy Ferdinand. His strictness is surely the reason. He always holds those around him to the highest of standards and raises them to his level." I recalled when my son Justus resolved to give his name to Ferdinand in order to become his attendant. Ferdinand gave him all sorts of tasks and conditions to complete first, and I was sure he had done the same with this young child.

"He certainly does give her all sorts of assignments to do," Lady Elvira mused. "That said... I believe they are essential to her future as a member of the archducal family. Rozemyne takes it well, though; she says that she does not mind as long as she can read books. I cannot help but pray that she does not get embroiled in any

further conflict.”

Lady Elvira and I continued to arrange the chambers as we spoke, and our conversation soon turned to Lady Rozemyne’s attendants. One such position was going to Otilie, who was Lady Elvira’s friend, apparently.

Because of Lady Rozemyne’s connection to the temple, her other retainers were going to be selected with extreme care. One was often closer to those in one’s service than to anyone else, so we could not risk someone untrustworthy being assigned to the role.

“Rihyarda, will you be attending the baptism ceremony?” Elvira asked.

“Indeed. I wish to see what kind of person Lady Rozemyne is with my own eyes.”

And so, Otilie and I went to Lady Rozemyne’s baptism. I wasn’t going to be introduced as her attendant until she was brought to the castle, but Lord Karstedt and Lady Elvira had granted my desire to meet her ahead of time.

But alas, disaster struck. Lord Wilfried dragged Lady Rozemyne away shortly into the introductions and ended up wounding her gravely. The ceremony was brought to a swift conclusion, meaning I would not get to meet Lady Rozemyne until our first exchange at the castle.

“Rihyarda, are you to be Rozemyne’s...?”

“That’s right. Lord Sylvester personally asked me to look after her.”

My boy’s reaction had come immediately after Norbert brought him and Lady Rozemyne into the room to see me.

I’d thought as much during her baptism, but Lady Rozemyne truly looked young for her age. Her golden eyes were sparkling with curiosity as she looked at me and then up at Ferdinand. Lady Elvira had been exactly right when she had said the girl was attached to him. Oh, what a heartwarming sight it was.

“Lady Rozemyne, this is Rihyarda,” Norbert began, introducing me. “She will be your head attendant here.”

“I appreciate your service,” Lady Rozemyne said. She lowered into a curtsy, and her unbelievably glossy hair cascaded down her shoulders like a waterfall. Her every movement bespoke such considerable practice that I struggled to believe she was raised in

the temple. She had apparently only been on the level of a mednoble when she first met with Lady Elvira, so I could guess she had been working immensely hard to adjust to her new position as a member of the archducal family.

Lady Rozemyne was wearing a tense expression when she looked up again. My boy Ferdinand was also awaiting my next words with some uneasiness.

Oh my... He certainly has changed.

I channeled my desire to welcome my new lady into a kind smile—and at once, I noticed Ferdinand start to relax.

“I see that Lord Karstedt has raised you right. I always like to see someone who has such good manners. Lady Rozemyne, I am Rihyarda. It will no doubt be a pleasure to serve you.”

Hartmut — That Fateful Ceremony

A previously unpublished chapter that takes place near the start of Part 3 Volume 1 and was posted online as part of a collection of disconnected short stories. Hartmut decides to attend Rozemyne's baptism, despite his misgivings about Otilie being assigned to serve her. To his surprise, what he sees there changes him completely.

Author's Note: This short story was written to celebrate Suzuka-san's birthday. She's always so passionate when she speaks about Hartmut, and many readers requested a short story about his one-sided first meeting with Rozemyne, so I focused on just that! As it turns out, Suzuka-san actually likes Ferdinand more. Oops?

“You recall that Lady Elvira's child, Lady Rozemyne, is being baptized this summer, yes?” my mother asked me. She had just returned from a private tea party with Lady Elvira, the knight commander's wife, and we were both holding sound-blocking magic tools. “As it turns out, she is due to be adopted by the archduke at the same time. I will be serving her in the castle.”

I spared our nearby attendants a glance, then said, “You? An attendant of Lady Elvira's daughter?”

Mother was exceedingly good friends with Lady Elvira, to the point that she had often taken me to Lady Elvira's estate even before my baptism. Not once during any of those visits had I met a daughter of Lady Elvira's, nor had Cornelius, who was in the same academic year as me, ever indicated having a little sister.

Which means this is not Lady Elvira's child.

In other words, she was presumably the daughter of Lord Karstedt's second or third wife—both mednobles, and both members of the Veronica faction. I knew fragments of their situation through things Cornelius had let slip.

This may be Lady Elvira's request, but... my own mother, serving

someone of such low status?

I was overcome by displeasure. Mother must have noticed, as she promptly began explaining the circumstances.

"I caught a glimpse of Lady Rozemyne while she was being educated. She is quite beautiful, as well as intelligent. I can understand why she is being adopted. Furthermore, as Lady Elvira's daughter, if she is taken in by the archduke, then she will certainly become the hope of the Leisegang nobles."

Lady Rozemyne was searching for attendants now that her adoption had been decided, but I found this all much too suspicious. There was no reason whatsoever for the aub to take in a child from a Leisegang noble; there had to be other, more significant circumstances that were being kept from us. I also found it hard to believe that Mother was acting by choice; she hadn't consulted my father, for one thing.

"This feels too careless for you, Mother," I said. "There is clearly something happening behind the scenes."

"Indeed, and my decision to help welcome Lady Rozemyne to the castle will afford me a peek behind the curtain. The castle has been changing drastically ever since Lady Veronica's imprisonment, and Lord Leberecht more than anyone wishes to know what is going on beyond that which those working for Lady Florencia can learn."

Father does? That is to say... this is something unknown even to Lady Florencia, the first wife of Ehrenfest? I crossed my arms, conscious that this adoption was the amalgamation of many desires and much authority.

"Furthermore," my mother continued, "this is an important time for the Leisegang faction, for whether or not we regain our former influence is at stake. Everything rests on this one chance, and so an opportunity to become the retainer of an archducal family member is very much welcome."

"I see... That is true," I replied with a nod, my attention now focused outside the window.

Factions this, influence that... It's all so foolish.

Going to the Royal Academy made reality painfully clear—the reality of Ehrenfest's position in Yurgenschmidt and how other duchies saw us. We had risen through the ranks somewhat after staying neutral during the civil war, but now we were looked upon harshly. The winners scorned us for not contributing in the battle, while the losers resented us for having attained a higher position

through no merit of our own.

What I find strangest of all is that our adults do not realize how empty our duchy's influence is to begin with.

Despite how meaningless Ehrenfest was in the grand scheme of things, Mother was attempting to serve a girl born from a mednoble for the sake of Father and his faction. It was all so foolish that it deserved nothing more than a derisive snort.

Baptism ceremonies generally took place at the start of the season—but not Lady Rozemyne's. Hers was being held at an awkward point between the start of summer and the time when nobles were gathering in the Noble's Quarter for the Starbind Ceremony.

More than two hundred nobles were gathered at Lord Karstedt's estate, with countless members of the Leisegang faction among them. The high turnout was no surprise considering that baptism ceremonies served the important purpose of debuting children to noble society. The archducal couple was here as well in preparation for the upcoming adoption, as was Lord Wilfried, their son.

There were many nobles of the Veronica faction among the retainers flocking around the archduke and the young lord, which created a very tense atmosphere.

"I heard from Lady Elvira that you will also be serving Lady Rozemyne," Mother said to Lady Rihyarda.

"Indeed," she replied. "Because of an order from Lord Sylvester, that is."

That gave me a moment of pause; Lady Rihyarda had educated Lord Karstedt and served as the current archduke's nurse when he was growing up.

It seems to me that this Lady Rozemyne is being upheld as someone of great importance. What in the world is she thinking?

"Not to mention, my boy Ferdinand expects great things from her," Lady Rihyarda continued. "He says the future growth of our duchy will rest squarely on her shoulders. The hopes being pinned on this pre-baptism child are so high, in fact, that I find myself worrying about her more than anything."

We watched Lord Ferdinand climb the stage as the High Priest. He had personally endured Lady Veronica's wrath for so long and was ultimately chased into the temple despite being a member of the archducal family.

Does he have something to do with this adoption?

Lord Ferdinand and I had never officially met, but the stories about him my eldest brother had told me from his time in the Royal Academy indicated that he was a man of extraordinary talent. He had entered the temple to signal his departure from noble politics, but his cunning nature made it plausible that he had always planned to depose Lady Veronica and return like this.

Of course, that was no more than speculation.

“Lady Rozemyne shall now enter.”

Once Lord Ferdinand had ensured that all the preparations were complete, the attendants of the estate opened the door. Lord Karstedt and Lady Elvira entered as the parents of the one to be baptized, followed by Lady Rozemyne herself. She did not recoil in the face of two hundred noble gazes, nor did she look around curiously. Instead, she merely continued forward, moving with grace and while wearing a gentle smile.

So this is Lady Rozemyne...

Her long hair swayed with each step. It was as dark as the night sky while at the same time as radiant as the stars themselves, and adorned with an ornament I did not recognize. As I had heard, she was a rather pretty child with balanced features, and the elegance with which she carried herself suggested she had been well trained despite her mednoble mother and temple upbringing. The rumors about Lady Elvira giving her a strict education in preparation for today were sure to be true, as were the tutors’ remarks that the girl was exceptional.

She comes across entirely like an archnoble.

I shot Cornelius a curious look and saw that he was anxiously watching Lady Rozemyne; he must have been very worried about her. Despite the loathing he felt for his father’s second and third wives, he did not seem at all opposed to accepting this girl as his own little sister, and understandably so—he had no reason to be embarrassed about someone so refined.

Strange. Whatever’s going on here, it must be something significant.

I watched dispassionately as Lady Rozemyne gripped a magic tool and made it shine, indicating that she had enough mana to be recognized as an archnoble. I applauded along with everyone else, but it was scarcely an achievement. She had proven that she could carry herself as an archnoble, but no part of this ceremony had explained why the aub desired to adopt her.

“Congratulations, Rozemyne,” Lord Ferdinand said. “You are now officially recognized as Karstedt’s daughter. A new child has been born in Ehrenfest.”

There was much applause, during which Lord Karstedt took the stage and raised a blue feystone ring high above his head. “I gift this ring to Rozemyne, now recognized as my child by society and the gods,” he declared, then slid it onto her finger.

It was now time for the priest onstage—Lord Ferdinand, in this case—to do his part. He granted Lady Rozemyne a blessing from Leidenschaft, notably by using his own ring.

Other priests would have to rely on divine instruments brought from the temple.

As I compared the events to my own baptism, Lady Rozemyne gave Lord Ferdinand her thanks. She would now bless him in turn, and the ceremony would end.

But she instead turned to the audience.

“I pray that Leidenschaft the God of Fire blesses all those in attendance, and the High Priest for celebrating my baptism.”

Everyone exchanged glances in response to the unusual development, while a blue light swelled within Lady Rozemyne’s ring.

“What...?”

As it turned out, her offer to bless *all* those in attendance had not been insincere; blue light flew up into the air, spun around, then scattered across the grand hall like blessed rain. It was a turn of events that I never would have predicted.

Just what is this?!

“What in the world?” came a similar mutter from the audience. “She produced that much light?”

“Just how much mana does she have packed into that small body of hers?”

Their surprise was only natural; the return blessing was supposed to go to the priest and the priest alone, not everyone in attendance. But given how calm Lord Karstedt and Lord Ferdinand both looked, Lady Rozemyne had not made a mistake. They had probably wanted to demonstrate her potential—and her being a child who hadn’t yet learned to compress her mana made it all the more impressive.

It wasn’t her mana capacity that surprised me, though. It was abnormal, to be sure, but what had left me in awe was the sheer

beauty of the spectacle. I could not explain why, but it was different from any blessing I had seen before. The blue light seemed to sparkle with life as though it were truly from the gods themselves.



Never before have I seen light like this.

A sudden warmth spread through my chest. The blessings given during baptism ceremonies were usually so mundane, but this... this was different. The ease with which Lady Rozemyne had granted a blessing that would have made most adult nobles wince made her seem like a genuine agent of the gods.

But why? Why is Lady Rozemyne's blessing so beautiful...?

I was still enamored of this newfound beauty when Aub Ehrenfest went up onto the stage and announced the adoption.

“The aub is adopting her?!”

“I was not informed! What is the meaning of this?!”

Judging by the responses, the news truly had been a secret. The hall immediately started to buzz like a struck hornet's nest but, after witnessing that extraordinary event, I saw no reason for the commotion; it was obvious why the aub would want her in the archducal family. His tales of her saintly deeds were even more wonderful. I wanted—no, *needed*—to hear more of them.

He did well to find her in the temple, of all places.

My evaluation of the archduke had become a little more favorable.

I scanned my surroundings. There were a great many nobles in attendance, and they would all be greeting Lady Rozemyne in turn. I already knew from my own baptism that it was impossible to memorize so many faces, especially when these first meetings were so brief. Only those who left a meaningful impression would be remembered.

My mother will be introduced as her future attendant, and my father is Lady Florencia's retainer. Perhaps that will make me stick out in her mind.

No sooner had that thought crossed my mind than I felt a little strange; this was the first time I had ever been so interested in another person. I was likely more surprised by this change of heart than anyone.

The first people due to be introduced to Lady Rozemyne were her guard knights, who would be accompanying her tomorrow. Next would be the retainers of the archducal couple, whom she would meet with often, then the retainers who would start serving her once she moved to the castle, Lady Rihyarda and my mother

included. Her family members, including Lord Bonifatius, would then follow—and that was when I would get my chance to shine.

“Nothing fun’s ever gonna happen here. Let’s go play. Follow me.”

But as I was eagerly awaiting my introduction, Lord Wilfried took Lady Rozemyne by the arm and dragged her out of the hall.

She did not return.

As it turned out, the sickly Lady Rozemyne had not been able to keep up with the young lord. She had fallen unconscious and sustained quite serious injuries, so Lord Ferdinand had cast healing magic on her before carrying her back to her chambers.

Lady Rozemyne was hurt...? Hm... I need to be careful about Lord Wilfried.

I gazed down at my hand. In what had felt like the blink of an eye, I had started to view Lord Wilfried as my enemy.

I suppose I will need to drag him down... so that Lady Rozemyne may become the aub.

Christel — A Tea Party with My Older Sister

A short story that takes place after the harspiel concert in Part 3 Volume 1. After witnessing the grand event with her own eyes, Christel, a background mednoble in Ehrenfest, recounts the experience to her elder sister, who hadn't been able to attend due to being married to a noble from the Veronica faction.

Author's Note: I put this story together after three years of writing *Bookworm*, as a thank-you to my readers. It describes the changes Ehrenfest is going through from the perspective of a less important noble, something that is often difficult to fit into the main story.

Last summer, my older sister married a noble of the Veronica faction. She had just recently returned to our home estate, having received permission from her husband to spend a few days with her family, and now I was about to have a tea party with her for the first time in quite a while.

One sees one's family much less often after marriage, and since outside tea parties are focused more on socializing with others than spending time with one's family, there had been no opportunities for my sister and me to have a private discussion. I was consequently rather pleased that we were having a tea party with just the two of us.

I took the first sip of tea, as was common etiquette. My sister shortly followed suit, albeit with a great deal more grace than when she had previously lived with us. She then got straight to the point.

"So, Christel—just what manner of tea party *was* that harspiel assembly everyone has been speaking about? You and Mother attended, correct?"

“We did. It was positively splendid. As I am sure you have heard, the songs Lord Ferdinand played were simply marvelous. His voice had such richness that it was impossible not to become completely enraptured. There is no doubting that a princess once sent him an invitation to play.”

I had attended the Royal Academy with Lady Christine and, while her playing was certainly impressive, I could not help but prefer Lord Ferdinand's. I closed my eyes and reveled in the memory, only for my sister to interrupt in a faintly impatient tone.

“Please do describe what manner of gathering it was. The event has been brought up at every single tea party I've attended since.”

She hadn't been able to attend herself since her husband in the Veronica faction had not given his permission, but the harpsiel assembly would no doubt continue to be the topic of discussion at all tea parties for quite some time.

I sighed. “Your husband is a member of the Veronica faction, so you cannot change your allegiance as easily as us neutral nobles. Your timing truly was unfortunate... To think Lady Veronica would be detained not even a year after your marriage.”

Had she waited just one more year, the political shift in power would have allowed her to cancel her engagement. Divorces, on the other hand, were viewed much more negatively within noble society. That said, my sister was a little too old to be looking for a new partner in any case.

“I resolved to marry a noble from the Veronica faction two years ago, when the rumors of Lady Veronica preparing for Lord Wilfried's baptism began to spread. It seemed certain that she would maintain an iron grip on her authority for years to come, but... I suppose nothing ever goes the way one wishes. I suspect the Goddess of Time was involved.”

“It is the fault of Aub Ehrenfest. I must admit, his harpsiel performance was splendid as well, but he is the one who ruined your and our families.”

I was highly displeased with the aub, though I could only speak ill of him in private family discussions such as this. Lord Sylvester had refused to take a second wife no matter how many times Lady Veronica ordered it, instead devoting himself entirely to Lady Florencia. This had resulted in many nobles thinking Lady Veronica's power would wane when he became aub.

That had not been the case, however. Nothing had changed

when he came to power. Lord Ferdinand was sent to the temple, despite having achieved the highest grades in the Royal Academy, and the archducal family was surrounded at all times by sycophants of the Veronica faction. For these reasons, the neutral nobles who carefully eyed the balance of power had steadily begun to favor Lady Veronica.

“When Lord Sylvester and Lady Florencia were entrusting the upbringing of their child to Lady Veronica, who could be blamed for thinking her power was set in stone?” I remarked.

“Indeed. That is why I asked Father for his permission to marry a noble from the Veronica faction.”

After my sister’s marriage last year, I was instructed to look for a husband from the Veronica faction as well. I was also told to avoid getting close to Leisegang nobles in the Royal Academy as our family shifted from being neutral to supporting the Veronica faction.

“And yet, to think the balance of power would completely flip overnight...”

Aub Ehrenfest had suddenly arrested Lady Veronica at the end of spring. He had shown her nothing but obedience for so many years prior, so nobody had expected it in the slightest. Under normal circumstances, one would plan ahead a tremendous amount before arresting the mother of an aub, but there were no signs that this had been the case here. The political waters had been quiet and still, with none of the usual ripples.

“My husband told me that not even his retainers or any of the high-ranking nobles who accompanied him to the Archduke Conference knew about his plans. It all came much too suddenly. What in the world was going through the aub’s mind...?” my sister complained as we both sipped our tea. If the aub had planned to get rid of Lady Veronica all this time, I would have rather he made it more apparent so that we could prepare accordingly.

“The aub’s thoughts are beyond me, but we do know he promptly adopted Lady Elvira’s daughter, a girl who was the subject of much scorn from Lady Veronica. We can imagine the Leisegang nobles will start receiving more favor now.”

“Indeed. Had Lady Veronica been in power, the aub would never have been allowed to adopt one of Lady Elvira’s daughters, no matter how much Ehrenfest needs her mana.”

The aub adopting Lady Rozemyne was a symbolic gesture that

he would favor Leisegang nobles moving forward. He had surely made this move so that he would not have to take a wife other than Lady Florencia.

“Christel, my husband is so taken by the Veronica faction that I fear the other nobles will soon leave him behind. In fact, he still refuses to accept that the balance of power has shifted at all.”

Just as few Leisegang nobles had expressed their obedience to Lady Veronica, few members of the Veronica faction were submitting to this abrupt change.

“I understand your fears, dear sister, but I imagine the aub will strive not to eliminate members of the Veronica faction, but to absorb them into the Leisegang fold instead. Many members of the Veronica faction were present during the harspiel assembly, and the majority of those among his retainers are likewise of the Veronica faction. He cannot distance them all over mere faction politics.”

Nobles of the Veronica faction were present all throughout Ehrenfest’s upper power structures. It was not possible to suddenly eliminate them all without putting the daily operation and management of the duchy into complete jeopardy.

“That would be ideal, but he is the man who imprisoned his mother overnight, without so much as a warning to his retainers. It is hard to imagine he will give much thought to the position we or our futures have been thrust into.”

Our house was neutral to begin with, so it was possible for us to lean toward either faction depending on our next actions. Now that my sister had married a noble from the Veronica faction, however, this would not be easy for her unless her husband changed his mind as well.

“Will you be marrying a Leisegang noble, Christel...?”

“I believe so. Father says it is essential for us to return to neutrality. That is why I was allowed to attend the harspiel assembly, after all.”

Father had gone as white as a sheet when he found out Lady Veronica had been imprisoned, considering that we had so recently leaned toward her faction. From that point onward, he began spending his days thinking only of a way for us to turn back to the now-dominating Lady Florencia faction. The nobility was thankfully still in a panic, which gave us a prime opportunity to shift ourselves back to the primary power. My marriage would play a significant role in this.

“Your final term at the Royal Academy is this winter, correct? Will you be able to find an escort in such a short time span?” my sister asked, worried. I would indeed have to find a Leisegang boy to escort me before my graduation ceremony; otherwise, I would need to ask my uncle or grandfather to escort me.

“I would at the very least like to find someone who will boost my image, but I cannot see that being uncomplicated. I have asked Lady Helmina for her assistance and shall be attempting to interact with Leisegang nobles as much as possible.”

“Lady Helmina? Did Father not forbid you from speaking to her, given that she has a Leisegang mother? Have you been keeping in contact with her regardless?” my sister probed, looking at me with exasperation. I could already feel my face flushing. Despite the orders Mother and Father had given me, I was still secretly friends with Lady Helmina.

“She is such a good person; I did not want to cut her off due to the circumstances of adults. Plus, our friendship remains only in the classrooms of the Royal Academy. I am not doing anything that will inconvenience our family.” I avoided eye contact as I gave my excuses, though I knew they would not change the fact I had disobeyed my parents. “Still, it is thanks to Lady Helmina that I was able to publicly show I am on good terms with the Leisengangs during the harspiel assembly. All’s well that ends well, would you not agree?”

Mother and I had only been able to associate positively with the Leisengangs because Lady Helmina and her mother had been willing to sit with us.

“I deeply regret that my marriage has put undue pressure on you, so I am relieved to know you have at least some connection with the Leisengangs. I feel as if my burden has been lessened somewhat,” my sister said with an apologetic smile.

I smiled in turn. There was still time for me to find an escort, and matters of engagement did not have to be settled anytime soon; I could wait until the balance of power had settled before making any concrete decisions. My sister and I each had unique hurdles to overcome as a consequence of the drastic change in the duchy’s political state, so I understood her feelings of remorse well.

Though that is not to say the balance of power may not change yet again right after my own wedding...

Faction politics were decided by the aub and those around him.

All we could do was move with the waves and strive to secure as solid a position for ourselves as possible.

We quietly sipped our tea, feeling bad for one another. Neither of us elected to speak, but our silence was not an awkward one; rather, it was one of compassion, as we each gave the other time to calm down.

“Christel, please do tell me about the harspiel assembly,” my sister asked again, setting down her cup and smiling as if attempting to wash away the previous mood. “At a tea party yesterday, there was a woman who proudly spoke of everything there having been fresh and new. The others who attended all expressed fevered agreement, and yet no one would explain what fresh, new things they were referring to. Is that not cruel?”

The tea party my sister spoke of was one attended primarily by those who had also attended the harspiel assembly, so she had ended up feeling extremely alone. This news did not come as much of a surprise—both Lady Helmina and I would admittedly become just as heated with excitement when we recalled Lord Ferdinand playing the harspiel, and there had been so many novel aspects to the tea party that those not in the know would struggle to comprehend even simplified explanations.

“I can hardly blame those other women. There was so much at the tea party that even those of us who were in attendance still do not understand. I am not sure how I could even begin to describe them in a way that would make sense to an outsider.”

“Oh my. You are saying exactly what they said,” my sister commented with an exaggerated frown. A chuckle escaped me.

“It’s true. Words alone struggle to suffice, and there is much we are obligated to keep secret from those who did not attend. There are a few examples here within our home that I could show you, however. Perhaps those will be easier for you to understand...?”

I instructed my attendant to retrieve my box, inside of which were all the treasures I had obtained during that sacred tea party. The first item I took out was one half of a ticket.

“Unlike most tea parties, we did not receive invitations; instead, we needed to purchase these things called ‘tickets’ to participate,” I explained. “We were shown a list of seats and allowed to choose where we wished to sit, rather than the organizer directing us.”

My sister listened to me with wide eyes, finding each revelation

more shocking than the last. "Does that mean seats were decided with no consideration of status and faction?" she asked, a hand over her mouth.

"Indeed. The tickets were separated into tiers based on price, and one could sit in any of the seats assigned to their particular tier. The seats closer to where Lord Ferdinand was playing were more expensive, and those farther away were cheaper."

The seating chart had also contained the names of those who had already purchased their tickets, so one could even intentionally avoid those they did not want to be near. It truly was a remarkable idea.

"According to Lady Helmina, Lady Florencia took a seat far from the stage to emphasize that one could sit wherever they liked. Her table had only members from her own faction, but at a neighboring table sat members of another faction, and they did seem to greet and frequently converse with one another."

Mother and I had purchased our tickets somewhat late, so we had been unable to sit close to Lady Florencia. Instead, we had taken Lady Helmina's offer for us to buy seats next to hers, allowing us the opportunity to listen to the music together.

"If attendees were able to sit wherever they pleased, were there many members of the Veronica faction near the front...?"

"For this performance, Lady Elvira made sure to position Leisegang nobles at the front so that Lord Ferdinand would not be disturbed."

"That is a relief," my sister said with a smile. "Lord Ferdinand received such poor treatment from Lady Veronica. It is good to know he was shown such consideration."

Despite being an archduke candidate, Lord Ferdinand had been cruelly antagonized even while attending the Royal Academy, having to endure the students and their attendants following Lady Veronica's orders. My sister was familiar with many incidents that had resulted from this, and she was relieved to know Lady Elvira had taken action to protect him.

"Upon our arrival at the tea party, attendants checked our tickets and guided us to our chosen seats. They then cut our tickets in half, see? Look along this edge here." I wasn't sure why they had opted to take one half of our tickets, but they had.

"Sweets called 'cookies' and 'pound cakes' were served at the harspiel assembly," I continued. "Lady Rozemyne created the

recipes for both, and they have been making frequent appearances at tea parties hosted by members of the Lady Florencia faction.”

“I am told they are quite unique and delicious,” my sister said with a wistful sigh.

I chuckled mischievously as I took out a bundle of cloth. “In here are cookies made with tea leaves, said to be Lord Ferdinand’s personal preference. They were sold after the performance as souvenirs. Would you care to try one?”

I took one of the carefully preserved cookies and handed it to my sister. She looked at it with great interest before taking a small, swift bite.

“This sweetness is... sugar, perhaps?” she asked. “It is not too sweet though. I feel as though I could eat these forever.”

“That faint sweetness goes perfectly with the crisp, crunchy texture, wouldn’t you agree? I find myself reaching for them more often than I would care to admit, but I am careful to pace myself such that I might savor the memories of the day.”

I picked up a cookie for myself and placed it on my plate. Despite my best efforts to savor the taste, it was gone in no time at all. I was taking care to eat only one a day, but there were already but two cookies remaining.

“The harpsiel playing of that day flashes through my mind whenever I eat one of these cookies,” I noted. “I have an important ritual for consuming them.”

“Oh? Please do elaborate,” my sister said, looking at me with amusement.

I next took the programming sheet out from the box. The front was decorated with an illustration of an unusual style that relied on thick black lines and white space, creating an image of a man playing the harpsiel. Beneath him were the names of the songs that had been played on that day, as well as their lyrics. My sister frowned a little as her eyes ran across the page.

“Sister, this here ‘programming’ lists all the songs that were played at the event,” I explained. “Many sheets identical to this were made to market a new for-profit industry known as ‘printing.’ I always gaze upon the lyrics written upon this sheet while eating the cookies, replaying the recital in my mind.” I closed my eyes, recalling the heavenly notes of the harpsiel as the sweetness of the cookie danced across my palate.

“I don’t believe I recognize any of these songs...”

“Observe the name of the composer. ‘Lady Rozemyne’ is written for each one, see?”

“Lady Rozemyne composed them, while Lord Ferdinand and... *Rosina* arranged them? Who is this ‘Rosina’?”

“Lady Rozemyne’s personal musician, I presume. These are most likely songs that Lady Rozemyne asked her musician to compose.” It was hard to imagine someone as young as she composing this many songs; it made far more sense to assume she was receiving credit for the work of her musician. That was not particularly uncommon.

“With the expectations these songs and sweets are no doubt going to create, I expect Lady Rozemyne is going to be under a lot of pressure during her debut,” I said. “I must say though, they were all quite excellent. This one in particular—this love song dedicated to Geduldh—practically exuded artistic talent.”

“Lord Ferdinand played a love song? I truly would have loved to hear that. Back in the Royal Academy I had resorted to sneakily eavesdropping while he practiced, but even then, his playing was so masterful that my heart swooned with each strum.”

My sister had attended the Royal Academy alongside Lord Ferdinand, meaning she had listened to his playing before, but the harspiel assembly was my first time. It was there that I was immediately convinced he had received a blessing from Kunstzeal the Goddess of Art. There was no other way to explain the divinity with which he played.

“A great number of magic tools were used so that Lord Ferdinand’s voice reverberated throughout the hall. I speak with all honesty when I say it felt as though he were whispering directly into my ear. I could see the Goddesses of Spring dancing before my very eyes. I imagine many even felt the arrival of Bluanfah the Goddess of Sprouts.”

“I know the feeling well. He truly does have the playing skills to entice even a princess,” my sister said, nodding to herself and laughing.

“I cannot say whether it was due to the romantic nature of the song or Lord Ferdinand’s sultry voice, but women were falling unconscious on the spot. Keep this between us, but Mother was no exception.”

“Truly?”

“Yes. Also, while our reason for attending was to change our

faction, we spent far too much money. Mother was not very motivated at first, but by the end of the love song... both she and I had more or less collapsed upon our table. We were in such a state that we were almost escorted out by the knights. It was only because we rushed to compose ourselves and professed that we were fine that they allowed us to stay.” I then went on to explain how a number of women hadn’t been quite so fortunate, ultimately needing to be carried from the venue.

My sister gave me an exasperated look. “To think she would faint in such a public place...”

It was an embarrassing failure for a proper lady, but no woman who had participated would ever describe this particular fainting spell as such. The air carried such intense excitement that not a soul could be blamed for passing out.

“It truly was a special time,” I said. “Everyone resorted to gripping an empty feystone beneath the table to contain their storm of emotions. I myself was surprised to find that I was impassioned enough to fill my feystone entirely.”

We all carried empty feystones for matters of emergency, but it was rare for a person to actually find the need to use one. It was standard to simply contain one’s storm of emotions with the mind.

“I now see why those of us who did not participate struggle to understand...” my sister said.

The harspiel assembly had not been a standard affair during which everyone put on a polite facade; it was a gathering where the attendees wore their hearts on their sleeves, exposing their feelings to the world. It was hard to explain this to those who had not participated, because doing so was the same as exposing one’s embarrassing history. Only those who had shared the joy of the heated event could understand and talk about it at length.

“Toward the end, the aub rushed over and played the harspiel alongside Lord Ferdinand. It was my first time hearing him play also, and I must say, he was very good. The music became heavier and fancier with them both playing at once. They played a well-known sehrhymne and we all sang along. It felt as though all the attendees became one in that moment, united in our excitement. I wish to experience it again one day, if possible.”

“And now I wish to as well...” my sister said with an envious sigh.

“Ahaha. Allow me to show you something else, dear sister, that

I would show to no other. These too must remain known only to those who participated, and they are my treasures.” I took out another bundle of cloth from the box and slowly unwrapped it.

“Oh my! These are illustrations of Lord Ferdinand! What is the meaning of this?! Should Lady Veronica hear about these, our house will...! Ah, yes. She is gone now.”

My sister gazed upon the illustrations, unable to contain the smile that had risen on her face. I knew well that my sister had admired Lord Ferdinand from afar when they attended the Royal Academy.

She would tell me about him quite regularly, speaking at immense length of his skill with the harspiel and his awe-inspiring ditter victories.

“These illustrations were created with the new printing technology I mentioned. They are amazing—beautiful, even—wouldn’t you agree? They capture Lord Ferdinand impeccably, whether it be his perfect eyes, his inquisitive brow, or his countless other handsome features. I have recalled the recital in my mind countless times while gazing upon these.”

I set the three illustrations down on the table, taking care not to crease or dirty them. I had ordered ornate frames so that I could display them around our home, but the order would take some time to finish. I needed to treasure and preserve them until then.

“Lady Helmina informed me about this; it seems printing is a new technology that can produce exact copies of documents,” I said. “I was very impressed when I saw so many copies of the same document, but I originally did not understand the value in pushing the industry to the point that donations were required to sustain it.”

When Lady Helmina had purchased the programming before the recital, I thought only that if one wanted copies of the same document, they could simply hire as many scholars as necessary.

“Indeed. Printing may be useful now while we are suffering from a shortage of personnel, but when there are more scholars, one would need only procure their services. Is this not stealing work from layscholars lacking in mana?”

Unlike my sister, I had not thought to consider the laynobles, but I imagined many other nobles also failed to see the point in spending so much on the printing industry.

“When I saw these illustrations after watching Lord Ferdinand perform, however, I stopped thinking that way. Being able to produce so many exact copies of something is of the utmost

importance. No scholar would be able to perfectly reproduce this illustration, no?"

Ordering art would usually result in a significant waiting period, and the artist could not sell copies of the same picture to multiple people at once. And yet, so many of us sharing the same illustration was superb. It emphasized our shared memories.

"In short, there are many copies of these illustrations," my sister said.

"Indeed. One hundred perfect copies of each illustration were sold at the tea party, all made by printing. As I'm sure you can guess, they all sold out."

My sister longingly gazed upon the illustrations on the table before looking up at me with a steely expression. "Christel, please do give me one," she said. "Then I will also be able to join the discussions at tea parties."

"I am afraid I cannot do that, dear sister."

"But you have three! Can you truly not part with just one? I too yearn for an illustration of Lord Ferdinand."

I knew well that my sister had flushed for Lord Ferdinand back in her Royal Academy days, and one of these illustrations would prove a valuable weapon for her to participate in tea party discussions, despite her having been unable to attend the harspiel assembly herself. However, the three illustrations sitting atop the table were all unique, and I had promised Mother that I would preserve them until the frames arrived. It was not my place to lend them without permission, and given how sharply Mother's eyes had gleamed when she battled the crowd to purchase them, it was hard to imagine she would ever allow them to leave the estate.

"I am keeping these safe for Mother, so I cannot give them away to anyone, not even you. Each one cost five large silvers."

"Five large silvers for an illustration lacking color...? I am surprised Father would allow Mother to purchase not just one, but three."

"He was furious, of course. He could not believe she would spend so much at a single tea party. Mother was only able to calm him by saying it was a necessary cost to shift our faction to more stable territory," I explained. Father was the one who had ordered Mother to attend the tea party in the first place, so he had not been able to argue any further.

"Oh my. But does that argument carry weight when one

remembers that Mother grew heated enough to fall unconscious?"

"My my... That is a secret between you and me, dear sister. Recall that I gifted you one of my precious cookies. Those were available for purchase only at the harspiel assembly."

My sister gave a sigh that was equal parts impressed and exasperated. She went to speak, only to be interrupted as an ordonnanz flew into the room.

"Who could this be...?" I wondered aloud.

The ordonnanz flew around the room once before settling in front of me. "Lady Christel, it's Helmina," came a bright, excited voice. "Lady Elvira is holding a tea party ten days from now to discuss the harspiel assembly. She said to invite all those who bought copies of each of the illustrations. Please do join us; it will be a positively splendid occasion."

The bird repeated its message three times before reverting into a yellow feystone, which then clattered onto the table.

"You earned Lady Elvira's invitation by purchasing all of the illustrations...?" my sister asked, her mouth agape. "I suppose Father truly cannot scold Mother for it."

I nodded. "Sister, I will attempt to persuade Lady Elvira and the others as best I can. Perhaps they will hold another harspiel assembly."

"Christel, I would not be able to attend without permission from my husband. I ask only that you see whether they can arrange for those like me to purchase the illustrations independently."

Ten days after that lively tea party with my sister, I attended another tea party with Mother, this one hosted by Lady Elvira. Our intention was not only to discuss the harspiel performance, however; we were gathering to extol Lord Ferdinand for all his virtues. It was an irreplaceably delightful time during which we all reminisced and allowed our fervent excitement to show. It was only natural then that there would be calls for another harspiel assembly to be held.

Upon seeing our enthusiasm, however, Lady Elvira's expression clouded over, and she looked across us all with sorrow in her eyes. "I regret this more than anyone, but I cannot hold another recital, nor can I sell any more illustrations of Lord Ferdinand," she announced.

Lady Elvira went on to report that she had received Lord

Ferdinand's assistance under the promise that it would be a onetime event. To make matters worse, Aub Ehrenfest had leaked to him the existence of the illustrations, which in turn caused Lord Ferdinand to forbid Lady Rozemyne from ever printing them again.

How terrible! To think we would be thrust into a pit of despair so soon after being taught the splendor of printing and donating so much!

It seemed that my feelings of displeasure toward Aub Ehrenfest would not be resolved anytime soon.

Lamprecht — Where My Path Leads

A short story originally written as a sales bonus for Part 3 Volume 3. Lamprecht is given the chance to stop serving Wilfried, who is at risk of disinheritance, and decides to consult his family on the matter. Which path is the right one for him?

Author's Note: Eckhart's scathing remarks à la Ferdinand went through several revisions over the course of writing this chapter. They were originally so much worse, so what you see here is actually pretty tame. (Hahaha.)

I'd returned home after sending my mother a very abrupt ordonnanz, but she welcomed me back without so much as a single question. I gazed around, searching for Cornelius.

"Lamprecht, if you are looking for Cornelius, he has already eaten dinner, said good night, and returned to his room," Mother noted. "Did you wish to speak with him?"

I shook my head. "No. Just with you." This had to do with Rozemyne, so it wasn't unrelated to Cornelius, but I didn't want my little brother seeing me so confused and uncertain.

Mother sighed and beckoned me over. "Lamprecht, come to my room. We are best to converse there, are we not?"

My return had come so suddenly that my room hadn't yet been prepared for me. I'd suggested that Mother and I wait until it was ready, but she had coolly refused and suggested that we go to her room instead.

Upon our arrival, Mother ordered her attendant to prepare us some cups. Then, once we had everything we would need, she cleared the room and started to pour us both some wine, filling our cups with the amber liquid.

"I am always with Lord Karstedt when I receive your reports, so it has been quite a long time since we have been alone like this,

Lamprecht,” Mother said.

I accepted the cup she offered me, and a rich, nostalgic scent tickled my nose. This was the first wine I’d ever drunk, and the last time I’d shared some with Mother had been when I made the decision to serve Lord Wilfried.

“This discussion will not be too different from our last,” I said.

“Oh? Have you been relieved of duty already?”

“No” was my firm response. As it stood, being removed from Lord Wilfried’s service was equivalent to being labeled “incompetent” by Rihyarda or Rozemyne. It was an extreme dishonor for a noble, which was why I could allow no room for doubt.

“However,” I continued, “Oswald told me in no uncertain terms that he would not mind my resignation. What I choose to do next will have a considerable impact on our house... so I thought it best to return and discuss my options with you.”

Mother cast her eyes down briefly, then silently indicated that I should continue.

I took a sip of wine and sighed. *Right... where to begin?*

“I expect you have already heard this from Father, Cornelius, and Lady Florencia, but Lord Wilfried has changed dramatically since he spent a day in Rozemyne’s shoes at the temple. This has been especially obvious to those of us serving him. It was only ten or so days ago when our main duty was to keep him from running away, but now he works harder than ever.”

“So I have been told,” Mother replied, bringing her cup to her lips. “But his newfound work ethic is the bare minimum expected of a child of the archduke, and he is still a long way from being considered ‘acceptable.’ His lack of an education must be because Lady Veronica desired a puppet aub whom she could control effortlessly... Lady Florencia must bemoan how low he has been permitted to sink.”

I could not deny Mother’s words. Lady Veronica had only ever scolded Lord Wilfried when he disobeyed her orders; not once had she spoken out against him neglecting his studies or being unreasonable with his retainers. In fact, when we had tried to lecture him ourselves, she had very harshly warned us not to “criticize the future archduke.”

“Lady Veronica instructed me not to defy my lord under any circumstances,” I said.

“And with such yes-men in his service, Lord Wilfried still might fail to prove himself, even with his new education. Oswald has decided not to take any new retainers, correct?”

“Correct. Lord Wilfried is already struggling with his new lifestyle; surrounding him with unfamiliar faces would only make things worse. Plus, if he *does* end up being disinherited, then those retainers would end up with black marks on their records. Oswald therefore decided that splitting the workload between fewer people is ideal.”

Out of everyone in Lord Wilfried’s service, Oswald was undeniably working the hardest. He was having to manage the distribution of work and keep the rest of us on track even as we lost more and more people.

I continued, “Given the likelihood that Lord Wilfried will end up being disinherited, I think minimizing the collateral damage is wise. And considering his current state, we cannot expect any Leisegang nobles to want to enter his service. We’re trying to keep this as private as we can, but tensions are always going to be high. I think Oswald is making a very reasonable decision.”

There were some Leisegang nobles among the retainers Lady Veronica had collected, but most of us had been intimidated into serving Lord Wilfried, and the treatment we’d received hadn’t been exceptional. The others had all quit as soon as Lady Veronica was detained, meaning I was the only Leisegang remaining.

“It does appear that Oswald is doing his best, but what of the other retainers?” Mother asked. “I am worried about Rozemyne. It seems very unlikely that retainers of the Veronica faction, which has spent so long oppressing Leisegang nobles, would obey the ways and words of my daughter. No matter what Oswald might say in support of her, they are bound to take issue. Am I wrong?”

I averted my eyes, instead focusing on the wine in my cup. The other retainers had vented their frustrations to me, and their words resurfaced in my mind.

Lord Wilfried was considered a source of shame for the archducal couple, owing to the lackluster education he’d received from Lady Veronica and the poor behavior of his retainers—but these shortcomings had only reached the public after Lord Ferdinand and Rozemyne exposed them. Their actions had put Lord Wilfried at risk of being disinherited and his retainers at risk of being relieved of duty.

Of course, Lord Wilfried was now working hard to avoid such an undesirable fate, but his efforts did nothing to stop Rozemyne from wandering in, besting him in every way imaginable, and then chastising everyone in earshot. She would say that he wasn't yet doing enough, that he was letting his guard down too much, and that his retainers were still being too soft on him.

Many of the retainers disagreed with these criticisms—as one would expect when they were used to supporting their lord unconditionally. They wondered how Rozemyne could be so wrong about Lord Wilfried, whom they thought was progressing by leaps and bounds, and started to wonder whether she knew her place as “a lowly adopted daughter.”

“As you expect, Mother, those who were forced to leave Lord Wilfried's service direct their frustrations not at Lord Ferdinand, who brought up disinheritance to begin with, or at Lady Florencia, who executed the dismissals, but at Rozemyne.”

The retainers' futures were ultimately decided by Lady Florencia, but Rihyarda was the one scrutinizing their every move. As a result, those who were relieved of duty often believed that Rozemyne was to blame.

“They did not understand me when I said that Rozemyne is trying to save Lord Wilfried from disinheritance,” I continued. “Although they know deep down that I speak the truth, they cannot bring themselves to accept it, and Rozemyne is such an easy target for their ire... Some even claim that Lord Ferdinand conspires to remove Lord Wilfried from his position as the next archduke and install her in his place.”

As I recounted the situation to my mother, I realized just how much Lady Veronica's influence still colored Lord Wilfried's retainers. Many continued to dismiss Rozemyne's advice as “unthinkably rude” and quietly admonish her for speaking out against Ehrenfest's next aub. Even I had been imprinted with the idea that Lord Wilfried was better suited to rule than any of the archduke's other children.

“I warned Cornelius to limit how often Rozemyne visits Lord Wilfried, hoping to spare her some disdain... but he refused, saying that her prying was at Lady Florencia's request.”

I'd thought there was no need for Rozemyne to endure so much hatred if she was just acting on behalf of Lord Ferdinand and trying to undermine her brother, but Cornelius had informed me that this

wasn't the case.

"Cornelius just recently moved to the castle as Rozemyne's apprentice guard knight," I said, "so he might still be blind to the dangers of malice. If you were to warn him as well, perhaps he would reconsider..."

Mother nodded in agreement. "I personally do not care whether Lord Wilfried gets disinherited, so I share your desire to keep Rozemyne from becoming even more hated, but..."

I squeezed my eyes shut upon hearing my mother's complete disregard for my lord. Her blunt phrasing reminded me of Lord Ferdinand. Lord Wilfried was working so hard, but Lady Veronica's deposition had made it painfully clear how few people actually wanted him to become the next archduke.

"Lady Florencia was overjoyed that her son has finally been returned to her care," Mother continued. "And it was Rozemyne's intervention that has given Lord Wilfried a chance to redeem himself. Trying to remove her from the equation now would only complicate things."

I had not been in the dining hall when Lord Ferdinand proposed the disinheritance, so I knew nothing of what they had discussed or how they had decided on the terms of their agreement. The most I had heard were the aub's declaration and a report from Oswald.

Mother shook her head in disappointment. "Those serving Lord Wilfried should want to protect their lord above all else, yet they so blatantly oppose Lady Florencia's wishes and disrespect the girl doing the most to save him... In a just world, they would be assisting her and expressing nothing but gratitude for her efforts."

I quickly opened my mouth to protest, not oblivious to the fact that she had included me in her criticism. It wasn't like we were *all* dissatisfied with Rozemyne; such griping only came from the people who had been relieved of duty.

"We aren't all ignorant of the work that Rozemyne is doing for our sake," I said. "Oswald and those who were in the dining hall understand. That's precisely why Oswald told me I don't need to continue tolerating fools incapable of seeing the reality of the situation. Unlike the other retainers, I can be of value to the archducal couple without serving Lord Wilfried."

As I was Rozemyne's older brother, some of the anger directed at her ended up falling on me as well. Oswald had noticed this, and that had spurred him to suggest that I resign. At this time when

everyone needed to work together, he likely considered a member of the Leisegang faction such as I to be a troublesome outsider... but perhaps he had other motivations as well.

In any case, I was sure that he wanted me to leave. He was already struggling with a shortage of retainers, so he would not have suggested it otherwise.

"I expect my decision to have a significant impact on our house, so... what do you think, Mother?" I asked, eyeing her carefully.

She placed a hand gently on her cheek, contemplating my question, then looked at me head-on. "With Lady Veronica's influence growing weaker by the day, there is no longer any need for you to protect me, Lamprecht. You may do as you wish."

"Mother..."

"I was passionately against one of my own children going to Lady Veronica... but you defied my wishes and went anyway, did you not? Though that was in large part due to how powerless I was."

There was a strained smile on her face. She was my mother, but stopping an adult from becoming someone's retainer was no easy feat—especially when their service was requested and their new lord or lady held a position of power. There had been nothing she could do.

"I can only imagine how much abuse Lady Veronica made you endure on my behalf," she continued, "but no longer."

My decision to serve Lord Wilfried had come after my older brother Eckhart refused. I had felt that it was my duty to protect my mother and younger brother... but that had not stopped Mother from worrying about me. It was only now that I realized this.

"Thus, whether you continue to serve Lord Wilfried or consider your duty as his retainer complete and choose to resign, I will not mind. But please know this: if you decide to stay and he fails his winter debut, it *will* mar your good name."

Although my family could protect me, there would be no way for me to erase the reality that my lord had been disinherited. Mother looked at me with worry and told me to think carefully about my future. It was a silent plea for me to resign.

Mother continued, "If you wished to serve Rozemyne instead, Lord Karstedt and I could recommend you. She is lacking adult guard knights in particular, so you would be taken on immediately."

I crossed my arms in thought. Of all the archduke's children, Rozemyne held the lowest status due to having been raised in the temple and adopted into the archducal family. The Leisegangs, Mother's and Father's relatives, were sure to acquire more influence going forward, and Rozemyne currently had very few retainers, so I was sure to be accepted into her service if I expressed an interest.

"I hadn't considered serving Rozemyne," I said, "but it would be nice to continue serving the archducal family. I need to consider my marriage prospects as well."

In the Royal Academy, when trying to make a good impression with the father of one's bride-to-be, it was much better to be a guard knight who had found a new lady to serve than a former retainer who had become a knight after his lord was disinherited.

Mother blinked at my remark, then her dark eyes hardened. "Lamprecht, I will support whichever path you choose... but if you are going to follow your heart, think carefully about what it means for an archnoble to become a retainer of the archducal family."

"Lamprecht," Father said, calling me into his office when I went for training the next day. "Your mother told me everything."

Mother aside, more or less everyone in my immediate family was a knight. It was funny how we found it easier to meet up at the training grounds than at home.

"Elvira said you can decide for yourself and presented you with a chance to serve Rozemyne," Father remarked, summarizing my conversation from the day before. "Do you intend to resign as Lord Wilfried's retainer?"

His eyes were as sharp as Mother's last night. I could tell that a single misspoken word would prove fatal, so I stuck my chin out and said, "No. My fellow retainers may not think highly of my being Rozemyne's brother, but I am not yet resolved to resign." It was a rather ambiguous response, delivered while carefully watching my father's reaction.

He sighed and then said in a hushed voice, "If you are still undecided, let me give you some advice. I am opposed to you becoming Rozemyne's guard knight."

"But why?" I asked, struggling to understand where this was coming from.

"I don't think you're built for it. Lord Ferdinand is her guardian here and in the temple, so you'd be serving him indirectly."

Just as Lady Veronica had overseen Lord Wilfried, controlling his education and directing his retainers, Lord Ferdinand was playing a very intimate role in Rozemyne's education, since she had spent such a long time in the temple. I recalled the time he had very lightly Crushed me and felt a chill run down my spine.

I'd be... serving him indirectly? Is that really true?

As I stood in a daze, Father continued, "Rozemyne's retainers need to do more than just enter the temple. They visit the orphanage and workshop often, and attend meetings with merchants. According to Damuel, her guard knights are also technically subordinates of Lord Ferdinand, since they assist him with paperwork and report to him on a daily basis. I am hesitant about you becoming Rozemyne's guard knight when he deems you as incompetent as your lord."

I hadn't thought about that at all. In the temple, I only did math work to save Rozemyne the trouble; it wasn't normal for guard knights to carry out duties like that each and every day. It caught me completely off guard.

"Plus," Father continued, "when you accompany Rozemyne on religious matters, you may need to perform some duties in her place depending on her health. You may need to eat with commoners when circling the farming villages, and you may need to sleep on bedding most would never consider fit for a noble."

"What...? Retainers of the archducal family are mimicking the priests and dining with commoners? I find that hard to believe, but... is that really what's expected of her guard knights?" To me, it was unthinkable to imagine a retainer of the archducal family dining with the commoners of a farming village.

"As a noble, you may find it hard to imagine, but that is what's expected of those who serve Rozemyne the High Bishop. Or at least that's what Eckhart said when Lord Ferdinand assigned him to accompany Rozemyne."

Apparently, Eckhart had accepted the task at once, eager to be useful to Lord Ferdinand. It was unbelievable.

"If you wish to serve her despite all these deterrents, then I won't stop you," Father said. "But you should know that, much like Lord Ferdinand, Rozemyne is unique in all sorts of ways. She is not someone who can be served without first forming immense resolve, being completely accepting of changing times, and having no intention of self-promotion whatsoever, so a person like you—a

person who still clings to Lady Veronica's old methods—would find it impossible to be her retainer.”

“What do you mean by that, Father? Is there something about Rozemyne I don't know?”

He placed a hand on his forehead. “Do you think there isn't?”

Clearly, he had no intention of telling me Rozemyne's secret.

“Lamprecht, now that Rozemyne is the aub's adopted daughter, Elvira and I can't make any large moves. We must obey Lord Ferdinand in the temple and the archducal couple in the castle. And, naturally, Rozemyne's education is entirely different from Lord Wilfried's.”

It was exactly as Father said. Serving under Rozemyne wouldn't be as simple as accompanying her to the temple and eating nice food; I would also need to help her assist Lord Ferdinand, guard her during religious ceremonies, and, above all else, visit farming towns and spend time with commoners. The job would require me to put some distance between myself and the rest of noble society, which I hadn't anticipated whatsoever.

“Well, Lamprecht? Think you'll want to serve as Rozemyne's guard knight?”

I shook my head and replied, “No, you're right. It's not for me.”

“Then that's all I have to say.”

Father nodded toward the door, so I took my leave... only to find my brother Eckhart waiting outside. My family really was worried about me. He gestured for me to follow him, so I gave a half-smile and obeyed.

Feeling a little embarrassed, I said, “Everyone sure is being a worrywart.” But my small remark was received with a very stern glare.

“I'm not worried about you.”

Eckhart clearly wasn't one for familial warmth...

A short while passed before my brother spoke again. “So, what's your plan?”

“I am not suited for serving Rozemyne, so I am unsure of what to do.”

Eckhart cleared his throat, then looked straight at me. “I don't care what you do, but it's about time you stop taking half measures.”

“Wha?” I widened my eyes. Eckhart's words were like Mother's but with any semblance of compassion stripped away. “Brother,

isn't that a bit harsh? After you refused Lady Veronica's request, I took on the mantle to protect our family and have served Lord Wilfried ever since. I would hardly consider that a half measure."

"You seem to be under the misapprehension that I *chose* to refuse Lady Veronica. It was quite the opposite. I thought that serving Lord Wilfried would put me in a better position to assassinate her and help Lord Ferdinand out of the temple, but Father got in the way."

Yeah, it doesn't surprise me that he would...

Even though Eckhart was furious with Lady Veronica, Father had swiftly intervened to keep Eckhart from realizing his scheme. He had stopped Eckhart from doing anything for the family, restricted his access to the castle, and kept him busy with Knight's Order paperwork and the training of new recruits.

It had never occurred to me before, but Father really must have been struggling. For as long as I could remember, he had laughed Eckhart off as "a strange case" for his desire to keep serving Lord Ferdinand "even after being relieved of duty." The emotional weight of concealing the truth from us all must have been immense.

"If you are judging me by your own standards, Brother, then I can see why you consider me so half-baked," I said. His definition of loyalty was on an entirely different level. "Mother and Oswald have both said that I am free to stop serving Lord Wilfried. I am simply considering the changing trends and trying to decide which path to follow."

Eckhart narrowed his blue eyes at me, looking completely exasperated. "You really don't get it, do you? Though it may sound nice, 'considering the changing trends' is the fate of laynobles and mednobles, who spend their lives cowering in the protection of those with power. That isn't an acceptable existence for an archnoble, let alone one with archducal blood. Just how much have Lady Veronica's drones corrupted you?"

His words snapped me back to reality. Like so many of the Leisegangs, I was an archnoble, but most of the nobles supporting Lady Veronica were mednobles. Being alone in their presence for so long had started to warp my way of thinking.

"You spent so long as Lady Veronica's lapdog, unable to chastise your lord and docile to the point that you hindered his growth. And now, instead of supporting him as he works to avoid disinheritance, you're treating this offer from Oswald as a lucky

break and trying to use your family's power to escape. How is that not a half measure?"

My brother's words cut me deep. After telling everyone to acknowledge how hard Lord Wilfried was working to improve, here I was prioritizing my future and trying to abandon him. I was stunned into silence, which prompted Eckhart to continue.



“Mother might have praised your selfless endurance, but is abandoning one’s lord in his time of need and searching for someone to replace him not the worst offense an archdual guard knight can commit? If you do something so callous, who will trust you to enter their service?”

From an objective standpoint, my intentions really were unforgivable. But I wasn’t going to roll over and take my brother’s abuse.

“So you say, but my lord doesn’t need me. There’s conflict between the retainers, so Oswald—”

“It isn’t up to Oswald to decide whether you’re needed. At the very least, before you resign, ask your lord what he actually desires.” He started rubbing his temples like Lord Ferdinand so often did. “You might not realize it, Lamprecht, but you’re stupid. And you don’t think things through.”

I was taken aback by how cruel he was being—but then he pointed at himself and said, “The same goes for me. No matter how much I rack my brain and try to follow theories, no good ideas ever come to me. We’ve been a family of mules ever since Grandfather, so instead... you’ll need to rely on your guts.”

Out of my siblings and me, Eckhart resembled our grandfather the most. He really seemed to live on his wild, animalistic instinct. I didn’t trust my gut anywhere near as much, but still, I was given a choice.

“Who do you think you’ll be better off serving?” he asked. “Lord Wilfried or Rozemyne?”

I already knew my answer—and with that in mind, I went straight to Lord Wilfried’s chambers. Oswald and the other retainers were surprised to see me, though I paid them no mind, while Lord Wilfried showed me his to-do list with a proud grin.

“What do you think, Lamprecht? I completed all these tasks!”

“Oh, that’s wonderful. You certainly are making fast progress.”

It was so apparent that he was trying his best, especially in comparison to the days we had spent chasing him all over the place. At that moment, I was struck with the genuine desire to support him for as long as I could.

“Heh. I’m working hard,” he announced. “You should work hard too and improve your math. Lord Ferdinand gave you a

scolding before, right?”

“Lord Wilfried,” I said in jest, “do you have a need for guard knights who aren’t good at math?”

“Obviously. Guard knights just need to be strong. Leave the math to scholars. Ah... but you should at least work as hard as me. Can you read numbers?”

“I can do that much.”

Lord Wilfried chuckled, then went to see Professor Moritz. Today, he was going to be using karuta to practice his letters.

He *did* need me. He had told me without as much as a second thought.

“Lamprecht,” Oswald said, “is there any meaning to you continuing to serve Lord Wilfried?” His eyes were filled with concern, but now I understood why—he didn’t want the stress of a guard knight who could quit at any moment. As the only Leisegang noble here, it had been foolish of me not to make a better effort to prove myself.

“I don’t want to do anything that might be considered a half measure,” I replied, looking him straight in the eye. “Even if you all shun me, I will support Lord Wilfried for as long as he desires my services.”

Oswald gave a small, genuine smile. “Those who would shun you have already been relieved of duty. Let us all work our hardest. Together.”

It was on that day, after receiving confirmation that I was needed and that my fellow retainers accepted me, that I truly started to see myself as Lord Wilfried’s guard knight.

Eckhart — Travel Tales for Justus

Description: The original, scrapped epilogue for Part 3 Volume 3. Eckhart tells a very impatient Justus what happened while he was accompanying Rozemyne for Spring Prayer.

Author's Note: Putting aside how these two characters always take things way too far, I ended up scrapping this story because it didn't feel quite right for the light novel. The things I wanted to convey are the same in both versions, so comparing them might be fun.

"You're pretty late, Eckhart. How long do you think I've been waiting for your ordonnanz?"

"You sure do like to exaggerate. It's only been ten days. Come on."

Justus had barely even arrived at my estate before he started complaining. I might have considered apologizing if this were a conversation with my late wife Heidemarie... but I felt nothing for this thirty-something-year-old man who would so readily abandon noble etiquette to feed his obsession with gathering information.

Actually, that last part was untrue. I did feel something: frustration.

I placed the sheet of parchment I had been reading from atop a stack on my desk, then told the attendant who had brought Justus into my office to go prepare tea. Then, I returned my attention to my impatient visitor.

"I just got back from Spring Prayer, which I attended at the orders of both Lord Ferdinand and the aub. It was a journey fraught with surprises that I wish to share with you—which is why I did my best to invite you *as soon as I could*."

During the Harvest Festival, Rozemyne had spent only a brief while with Lord Ferdinand. They had acted separately for the most part and reunited only for the goltze hunt. Thus, there were plenty of things that I had just allowed to wash over me—things I had assumed were normal for commoners or those in the temple, where

nobles so rarely went.

“Not only did the guard knights know far too little about Lord Ferdinand, everyone accepted whatever occurred simply by saying that the temple was not the Noble’s Quarter,” I said. “It felt like communication was impossible.”

After everything I had seen and heard during this year’s Spring Prayer, what I wanted more than anything was someone to share in my surprise. I’d even regretted Justus needing to leave Hasse to transport the registration medals.

“Riveting tales of travel, huh? Sounds like fun,” Justus said. He then peered down at my desk. “By the way... what were you doing when I came in? Rare to see you searching for something in your study.”

The rude cad. The documents weren’t anything I was trying to keep secret, so I gave him the entire stack.

“Damuel asked me for any documents showing how Lord Ferdinand used gewinnen to teach ditter strategies back in the Royal Academy,” I explained. “So, I was looking for educational resources from the time. He wants to use them to tutor Angelica, apparently.”

“Think she’s gonna make it?”

“No clue” was my frank response. Her grades had nothing to do with me. “It’s unthinkable that a retainer of the archducal family would need remedial lessons. After hearing that Rozemyne wanted to keep someone so incompetent by her side, I genuinely started to doubt her senses.”

Any other member of the archducal family would have cut off a failing apprentice knight without a moment’s hesitation. But this strange forbearance with Angelica, on top of the incident with the citizens of Hasse, seemed to suggest that Rozemyne was incapable of abandoning anyone—no matter how incompetent and unneeded they were.

“To be blunt,” I said, “Rozemyne’s too soft. I don’t think she has the right personality for a member of the archducal family.”

A teasing smile crept onto Justus’s face. “For all your negative talk, you sure seemed invested in finding those documents.” But I wasn’t trying to help Angelica or Rozemyne. Instead—

“I’m doing this for Damuel and Cornelius. Spring Prayer afforded me plenty of time on the road with Damuel, and it became immediately apparent how much he’s breaking his back to teach

Angelica and Cornelius.”

“So, what, you’re all buddy-buddy with Damuel now?” he asked, still grinning. “Times sure have changed. I remember your initial opposition to a certain little laynoble being assigned to an archduke candidate indefinitely.”

I nodded. “And those feelings haven’t changed. The burden’s too great for Damuel and his limited mana capacity, and nobody’s going to be happy about him serving Rozemyne. It would sink his career, but his life would be so much easier if she just let him quit. Though, well... according to Lord Ferdinand, Damuel plays a crucial role for his lady.”

Damuel’s presence in the temple was clearly treasured, and Lord Ferdinand had said that Rozemyne needed someone who knew her from her commoner days serving as her retainer. He also considered her extreme tolerance with saving Damuel and raising Angelica’s grades an opportunity to prove her compassion as the Saint of Ehrenfest.

“If all this is what Lord Ferdinand desires,” I said, “then I will do everything in my power to support it, simple as that. Thankfully, it seems that Damuel is something of a late bloomer; even as an adult, his capacity continues to increase, bit by bit.”

I went on to detail what Lord Ferdinand had told me about training Damuel, at which point Justus put on a more serious expression and gave the stack of parchment a light smack. “Eckhart, were you *really* looking through all these for Damuel? Sounds to me like you were just doing it for Lord Ferdinand.”

“Hm... You know what? You’re right. What I said about doing it for Cornelius is still true, though. He never showed enthusiasm for anything before, but now he’s motivated to study and has the support of our parents. Helping him is my duty as his elder brother. Plus, it should make him understand what makes Lord Ferdinand so incredible, which means I’m killing two birds with one stone.”

Justus smirked. “So that’s your real motivation.”

I didn’t think there was anything wrong with that; Cornelius was still going to benefit, after all. His problem was that he’d attended the Royal Academy too late to witness Lord Ferdinand in action—but as that thought crossed my mind, something else occurred to me.

Wait, hold on... Damuel only heard about Lord Ferdinand through Henrik yet seems to understand his grandeur perfectly. Was I unclear

when trying to explain things to Cornelius? Or did my lectures not come often enough?

I reflected on my errors. As an elder brother, I was to blame for not speaking about Lord Ferdinand more often and more clearly. But at the same time, Cornelius was now serving a member of the archducal family. Sure, he had only attained that position because our house had required it, but he was now taking his studies very seriously. We would have more opportunities to speak from this point forward—and more opportunities to discuss what made Lord Ferdinand so amazing.

“Leave when you’re done,” I said to the attendants preparing our tea. Then, I offered Justus a seat and took out a sound-blocking magic tool. These tales of my travels during Spring Prayer weren’t to be discussed openly.

“So, what happened?” Justus asked me. “Wish I could have been there with you on the Night of Flutrane.”

“Just be glad you got to see the Hasse executions. I hear you had to twist a few arms to attend not just as a tax official but as the scholar in charge of the registration medals.”

“Well, it was a rare opportunity to see archducal magic up close. I wasn’t going to let it slip through my fingers.”

He was right about it being a rare sight, though I personally only cared when it was Lord Ferdinand performing.

“Eckhart... what did you think about Lady Rozemyne?” Justus inquired. “She was saying some pretty naive things about Hasse’s punishments.”

I considered the question. Justus had praised Rozemyne for working hard and imitating a noble despite her commoner origins, but I thought she had a ways to go when it came to developing the airs and authority expected of an archducal family member. Still, she had at least exceeded my initial evaluation: “My commoner little sister for whom Lord Ferdinand shows much favoritism.”

“I’m still not pleased with how Hasse was punished,” I said, sipping my tea. “Rozemyne still seems to be thinking like a commoner, and her misgivings put Lord Ferdinand through a lot of trouble. For quite some time, I saw her only as someone whose weaknesses inconvenienced my lord... but my opinion began to change when I attended Spring Prayer, and it changed even more when I spoke with Lord Ferdinand about the matter.”

“Oh? Is that so?” Justus leaned forward, his eyes sparkling. “But

she was so sickly during the Harvest Festival that she needed to rely on his rejuvenation potions just to do her job. And were you not furious about how she dealt with Hasse? As I recall, you also ranted about how you wished you could combine her mana and stamina and separate them into equal portions. I'm interested to hear what made you change your mind."

"I still think she was too naive and benevolent in Hasse. To the archducal family, commoners are citizens to be managed, and rebels are to be purged without hesitation. I'm not sure how she's going to last when she can't even manage that much... and, in that sense, my impression of her remains the same. But she can also benefit Lord Ferdinand, which is rare. There were so many surprising developments over the course of Spring Prayer that I could scarcely keep my emotions hidden."

I thought back to Spring Prayer. Rozemyne was still as frail as ever, and seeing her grimace as she drank one valuable rejuvenation potion given to her by my lord after another had truly been exasperating. Compared to during the Harvest Festival, however, she had not been bedridden as often—and when I realized that this was because Lord Ferdinand was caring for her, an immense shock ran through me as though I had been struck by lightning.

"Unlike during the autumn," I continued, "Rozemyne stayed with Lord Ferdinand for this ceremony. It caught me entirely off guard, since I so rarely have the chance to see them together. Lord Ferdinand was treating her with as much care and consideration as he would an especially valuable plant for brewing. He had an eye on her the entire time."

It was one thing for him to look after medicinal herbs for his research, but never before had I seen him care so much for another human being. Were my Heidemarie still alive, she would have kicked up a huge fuss over it.

"Yeah, Lord Ferdinand showing compassion for Lady Rozemyne after the Hasse execution was something of a shocker," Justus admitted. "I was standing by at the time, ready to intervene if he was too harsh with her, but my concerns weren't necessary at all."

"Right. Lord Ferdinand was forced to fend for himself to survive, which is why he always refused to rely on his retainers. He expected to be attacked the very instant he showed weakness. I assumed he would yell at Rozemyne to get her act together, but

instead...”

After enduring so much abuse from Sylvester’s mother while growing up, Lord Ferdinand had developed a habit of never showing any vulnerabilities or weak points. He could perform acts of kindness if he logically determined that doing so would further his interests, but he struggled to prioritize his actual emotions. At times, his attempts to do so ended up indirect and obscure enough that even I wanted to put my head in my hands while watching from afar.

Incidentally, the acts of compassion that had stunned Justus and me were as follows: After the incident in Hasse, Lord Ferdinand had granted Rozemyne time to rest and even let her hold on to her father’s cloak. Then, he had stopped her attendants on several occasions to ask how she was doing. It was rare for him to care for someone so openly—but, at the same time, I was glad to see him opening up a little without suffering for it.

“But that wasn’t all,” I noted. “Get this—Lord Ferdinand, *our* Lord Ferdinand, said that he’d prefer food that suits his tastes. He even got Rozemyne’s personal chef to make his lunches.”

“What?!” Justus yelled, his voice cracking in shock. “The same Lord Ferdinand who tries to replace meals with mere supplements, claiming that research sustains him much better?!”

Hearing his complete and utter bewilderment satisfied me to no end. This was exactly what I’d craved—someone to share in my surprise. Everyone else had accepted the request without batting an eye, agreeing that it was only natural to desire tastier food. Perhaps that behavior was just normal in the temple.

“Indeed,” I said. “He was firm in his demands and everything. Said that he was willing to endure commoner food on occasion but not every day. And, on top of that, he didn’t even bother to poison-check the meals that Rozemyne’s chefs made for him.”

“What in the... That *must* be common practice in the temple.”

Only in extenuating circumstances would a noble ever share personal chefs with another; the risk of an attempted poisoning was simply too great, and none knew this more keenly than Lord Ferdinand. Even when he was living in the castle after coming of age, he had rarely ever eaten there. I never would have expected him to assign Rozemyne’s chefs to make his lunch every day.

“And not just that,” I added. “On the road, he negotiated with Rozemyne to buy even more of her recipes.”

Everyone knew from winter socializing that Lord Ferdinand had purchased recipes from Rozemyne in the past, but I'd never thought much about it. He had always shown so little interest in food that I'd assumed it was a gesture performed as her guardian, intended to popularize her recipes as a trend. I certainly wouldn't have guessed that, upon learning that there were only two chefs who could demonstrate how to make those dishes, he had spent money to secure one of them for himself.

"Ngh... Lord Ferdinand, a gourmet and picky eater?" Justus groaned. "I've never heard something so absurd—so unbelievable—in my entire life! Does she know how much I've struggled just trying to get him to eat normal meals?!"

"Yet nobody in the temple, not even Damuel, considered it strange! Do you understand how shocked I was?!"

"Oh, absolutely!"

Justus and I enthusiastically shook hands. Back when the previous aub first became unwell and Lady Veronica's power grew, Lord Ferdinand developed some particularly dire eating habits. We had needed to employ every technique at our disposal to secure him safe food and earn his trust, so the fact that Rozemyne had made so much progress so effortlessly was definitely a shock.

"Ngh... I wish I'd been there," Justus griped. "After what occurred on the Night of Schutzaria, I'm guessing there were some strange happenings on the Night of Flutrane too, right?"

"Yep. Some *very* strange happenings."

"I knew it!" Justus shouted, slapping his leg in frustration. He then fixed me with a stern glare, almost willing me to continue.

I went ahead and explained what we had seen on the Night of Flutrane, as well as what Rozemyne had seen from her perspective as a girl. Justus hung on my every word, a noticeable glint in his eye. Then, when I concluded my tale, he started to mutter.

"A magic barrier that not even Lord Ferdinand could penetrate, shining balls of mana, flowers and plants that grew larger in response to Lady Rozemyne's singing..."

"Rozemyne and the girls were completely careless, wandering around and riding the giant leaves while gathering ingredients. I can't think of anything more dangerous. Lord Ferdinand tried everything in his valiant battle to pierce the barrier, but in the end, we were forced to wait until sunrise."

Everything had turned out okay in the end; the mana barrier

eventually thinned, allowing us to break through, and Lord Ferdinand managed to catch Rozemyne before she hit the ground. Still, it had been a harrowing experience for us all.

I continued, "On a more positive note, the ingredients Rozemyne gathered seem to be pretty rare. Lord Ferdinand was overjoyed when he reported the outcome of the mission to Father. Most of the details washed over me—I can never follow along with those kinds of conversations—but from what I understood, they're a lot different from the rairein nectar that you got back in the day."

Justus began to groan, lamenting that he hadn't been able to join us. He was being such a pain, which was exactly why Lord Ferdinand was opposed to him tagging along on such trips.

"Why not just ask Lord Ferdinand for the details?" I said. "I'm sure he'd tell you. Though I doubt we're going to return to the Goddesses' Bath, since men aren't allowed to enter, nor do I think he'll give up any of the rare ingredients he got."

He had said that he wanted to research them, so he probably wouldn't surrender even one to Justus, who cared only about collecting rare things.

As I recalled what Lord Ferdinand had said about the rairein nectar, Justus gave me a serious look. "Eckhart... do you think a guy could get past the barrier and into the Goddesses' Bath by cross-dressing as a woman?"

"Not sure you'd be able to trick the gods, but you can give it a shot if you're that desperate. Just don't get me or Lord Ferdinand involved. Go on your own."

Justus crossed his arms and started to mutter under his breath. His "plan" had been flawed from the very beginning. Perhaps it would work, but any deity foolish enough to be deceived by his cross-dressing would cease to be a god in my eyes.

"I'd need to go next year, but I don't think I'd manage on my own. Better give up on the Goddesses' Bath, then..." Justus groused. Then, he looked straight at me and said, "Incidentally, Eckhart... have we settled on the summer gathering spot?"

"Mount Lohenberg—but don't assume you're coming. Rozemyne is sure to do one strange thing or another, and Lord Ferdinand made it very clear that he can't look after both of you at once."

"Excluding me again?" Justus groaned, his head in his hands. "That's just too cruel."

I was used to—and more or less immune to—his complaining by now. “Don’t try and tell me you’ve forgotten just how bad things got last time after you killed all those feybeasts. ‘They were sleeping so soundly,’ I remember you saying. ‘Their feystones were free for the taking.’”

Mount Lohenberg had been filled with mana, and just thinking about how close it had come to erupting sent a shiver down my spine.

Justus grimaced. “I remember, and that’s precisely why I won’t do it again. Could you help me convince Lord Ferdinand that—”

“You might not repeat that particular offense, but I’m sure some new discovery or another will inspire you to start poking around. Then you’ll give the same old excuse—that it was your first time making that mistake, that it won’t happen again, yada yada. We’re going to be following a strict schedule; we don’t need that kind of uncertainty.”

Justus responded to my refusal with a vexed glare, but that did not bother me in the least.

After all, I prioritize the wishes of my lord above all else.

Wilfried — Time with My Siblings

A short story originally written as a sales bonus for Part 3 Volume 4. Wilfried visits his younger siblings Charlotte and Melchior while staying home for the Archduke Conference.

Author's Note: This chapter really emphasizes how Wilfried was the only one among his siblings whom Veronica raised, despite them all sharing a mother. It was fun getting to write about pre-baptism Melchior; I wasn't able to do that from Rozemyne's perspective because they're not siblings of the same mother.

Fifth bell chimed, marking the end of afternoon studying and the beginning of my free time. Overall, it was another productive day. I still couldn't compare to Rozemyne, but I was a lot better at harspiel than I used to be. There were even new songs I could play.

"Oswald, can I visit Charlotte and Melchior today?" I asked.

"Yes, Lord Wilfried. We can confirm that you have caught up to Lady Rozemyne in both history and geography."

Apparently, I was behind in my studies and needed to close the gap. As a result, even though I'd already had my debut and safely made it into the winter playroom, my spring thus far had been spent chipping away at a mountain of work. Rozemyne was living in the castle while our parents were absent for the Archduke Conference, and I'd been told to focus on history and geography so I wouldn't look really bad compared to her.

I studied so hard and for so long without any breaks at all, but she caught up to me in three days and even got mad about me getting to read new books first. It's not fair!

How was I supposed to beat Rozemyne when it came to studying? Ferdinand was completely right in his evaluation that she'd start reading the moment you gave her a book—and she'd pull all sorts of tricks to get her hands on one, even when it wasn't time

to study. That was why I'd needed to be firm with my retainers: "I'll work hard as a child of the archduke, but don't expect me to overtake Rozemyne! It's impossible! Can any of you even beat her?!"

They had ultimately acknowledged that it was an unreasonable request, and we had instead shifted our focus from beating Rozemyne to simply meeting the standards expected of an archducal child. My workload was still pretty ruthless, but I was actually allowed some free time now, which came as a huge relief.

"Also," Oswald said, "Lady Florencia asked you to visit Lady Charlotte and Melchior in the main building while she is gone, did she not?"

"Yes, I was asked to play karuta and cards with Charlotte. She's going to have her baptism and debut this winter, so I need to interact with her as both her big brother and senior."

"You worked very hard in the run-up to your baptism, Lord Wilfried. Lady Florencia surely hopes that your younger siblings will take inspiration from your efforts."

First I'd been told that messing up my debut would result in my disinheritance, then I'd been given a mountain of tasks to complete. In the end, after much hard work and the help of my retainers, I'd managed to come out on top and start leading the kids in the winter playroom. My retainers had even begun praising me as an ideal archduke candidate.

"It's my duty as Charlotte's big brother to make sure her debut performance is good enough for a member of the archducal family. That's what Mother expects, right?"

Oswald nodded. "She likely wishes for you to strengthen your bonds with your siblings through karuta and cards while also teaching them about the status of the winter playroom."

I puffed out my chest. Most of my free time thus far had been spent playing karuta and cards with my retainers, but I was much happier to have Mother entrust me with big brotherly duties and to be able to visit Charlotte and Melchior more often.

Grandmother always told me I wasn't allowed to see my siblings before their baptisms, so I've barely spent any time with either of them...

All of a sudden, it hit me—studying and managing the winter playroom had kept me so busy that I'd forgotten to ask Father how Grandmother was doing.

"Oswald, how is Grandmother?" I said. "Can she not come back

yet? It's been almost a year now. Has Father said anything about her recovery?"

Oswald shot my other retainers questioning looks, whereupon they all glanced at me and shook their heads. He nodded, then spoke as their representative.

"We have heard nothing of note. We will consult the aub once he returns from the Archduke Conference."

About a year ago, after my baptism, Grandmother was taken ill and went somewhere far away to recover. I was forbidden from seeing her in case I caught her sickness, so we hadn't been able to catch up in such a long time. I really regretted that I couldn't tell her what a success my debut had been and that my studies were going really well.

"I really hope she gets better soon..."

An entire year had passed, but she hadn't gotten any better. Maybe she never would. I shook my head, trying to banish that awful thought from my mind.

I decided to leave my room and start toward the main building—and, along the way, I just happened to bump into Rozemyne. She was in her single-person highbeast, which meant she was probably on her way to the main building as well; according to Rihyarda, whenever Rozemyne was staying at the castle, she always spent her free time in the book room. Personally, I couldn't figure out why she liked reading so much. It was way more fun practicing swordplay with the knights in the training grounds.

Though I guess she might not enjoy that. She has a hard enough time just walking around.

"Oh, Lord Wilfried," Rozemyne said when she noticed me. "Where might you be going today?"

"To visit Charlotte and Melchior. Why not come with me instead of always going to the book room?"

The girls in the winter playroom were always doing all sorts of girly stuff together, so maybe Rozemyne and Charlotte would appreciate an opportunity to do girl things too. At the very least, Charlotte would probably love to spend some time with her big sister. But the moment I extended the offer, Rihyarda exchanged a look with Oswald, then let out a sigh.

"We appreciate your invitation, my boy, but milady cannot come with you. The archducal couple would not permit a half-sibling to visit the young ones before they have been baptized."

Rozemyne must have understood what Rihyarda meant because she continued moving along in her highbeast. “I must go to the book room,” she said with a smile, “but you may read one of my picture books to them in my place. Do your best to raise them into book-loving children!”

And with that, Rozemyne’s group was gone.

“Er, Oswald... what was Rihyarda actually saying?” I asked, confused. “Rozemyne’s my little sister, so why does she need permission from Mother and Father? Before my baptism, I needed permission from Grandmother, but I don’t remember getting it from my parents.”

Oswald slowly shook his head. “As your head attendant, such matters fall to me.”

Oh, I see. I didn’t know that.

“Furthermore, as Rihyarda inferred, only the archduke, his first wife, and their children may enter the third floor of the main building. After all, that is the aub’s living area. Lady Rozemyne may have been adopted, but as you do not share a mother, she is not allowed entry. Thus, take care before inviting her there in the future.”

According to Oswald, mothers had such an enormous influence on their babies’ mana that, in private, half-siblings weren’t considered siblings at all. Thus, while Rozemyne was publicly the aub’s adopted daughter and my little sister, she was actually considered to be *Lamprecht’s* little sister.

Lamprecht was here as my guard knight, so I gazed up at him. He put a hand on my shoulder and said, “Lord Sylvester is married only to Lady Florencia, so this might not mean much to you, but Lady Rozemyne receives the same treatment as a sibling from another wife.”

“I don’t really get it.”

Rozemyne was being treated as Mother and Father’s daughter now, meaning she was a proper member of the archducal family. And since I’d never had a half-sibling before, I didn’t know how they were usually treated.

My attendant Linhardt folded his arms. “Adopted children and half-siblings are all considered part of the same family, but they are treated a bit differently when it comes to spending time with siblings of the same mother who have yet to be baptized.”

I nodded along. “So basically, Grandmother is my full sibling.

Because we spent time together before my baptism.”

“No!”

“Wha...?”

Linhardt was firmly shaking his head at me, but why? Grandmother was the only family member I’d lived with before my baptism.

“Full siblings are those you share a mother with,” he explained. “Naturally, this is not the case with your grandmother.”

Apparently, my direct family—that is, my family connected to me through Mother—were Father, Mother herself, Charlotte, and Melchior. Rozemyne was included publicly, and if that extended to the entire archducal family, then Grandmother and Lord Bonifatius were as well.

“In the past, Lord Ferdinand was also a member of the archducal family,” Linhardt explained. “Now that he is in the temple, however, he does not publicly count. Lord Sylvester relies on him often for paperwork, so he is still *treated* as part of the family, but that is not precisely the case.”

“There are so many annoying definitions and distinctions here,” I said. “It’s surprising how distant I actually am from Grandmother.”

We made our way through the main building. Apparently, when viewed from above, it was basically a long rectangle with a garden in the middle. The south side usually had a bunch of scholars busily traveling between offices and meeting rooms. It was also where places like the grand hall, tea rooms for formal meetings, the teleportation hall, and the book room were.

On the north side were the aub’s living quarters. The third floor had rooms for the archducal couple and their pre-baptismal children, while the second had parlors, guest rooms for personal visitors, the dining hall, and hallways connecting to the northern, eastern, and western buildings. The first floor had rooms for live-in attendants and such, apparently. I didn’t really know, since I’d never been.

The northern building was where children of the archduke lived from their baptism until they came of age. My and Rozemyne’s rooms were there. The eastern building was for retired archducal couples and was where Grandmother raised me before my baptism—though it was closed off now that she had gone far away for her recovery. The western building was where the archduke’s second

and third wives lived, but as Father was only married to Mother, it was empty for now.

I used a key borrowed from Oswald to open a door on the second floor, behind which was a stairway leading to the third. Until recently, I'd hated the feeling of the key sucking out my mana, but now it didn't feel bad at all—maybe because I'd started supplying mana to the foundation. The authentication ended without issue.

I really am growing.

My retainers' praise for me was true—with each passing day, I was learning to do more and more things. I opened the door, feeling my own growth firsthand. Then, after stepping through and locking it again, I passed the key back to Oswald.

The stairway was only faintly lit; the doors were always tightly locked for security, and there were no windows, so it felt like nighttime even now, at midday. We could see where we were going, since the walls, floor, and stairs were all pure white, but it was still a little claustrophobic.

We climbed the stairs until we reached another locked door. I opened this one the same way as the last, then entered the hall connecting all of the archduke's private rooms. One of those was the children's room for Charlotte and Melchior. There was a guard knight posted in front of the door, but Oswald spoke to them for me.

"Charlotte, Melchior," I said upon entering the room. "I'm here to play."

"Oh my. Brother," Charlotte replied. "We have been waiting for you." Her hair, which was the same color as Mother's and my own, bounced as she turned to face me.

Before she could say anything else, her head attendant coughed. Charlotte let out a tiny noise in response, stood up straight, then knelt before me with polite, noble movements.

"The Goddess of Time has woven the threads of our fates together once again..." Charlotte said in a serious voice, then stood back up with a giggle. "What do you think, Brother? I have not yet memorized the names of all the gods, but I have learned to give greetings to some degree."

"Charlotte, what kind of greeting was that?" I asked. It wasn't one I'd heard before, so I didn't know what it meant.

"Oh, do you not know? It is used when two nobles have not met

each other in a long time and are overjoyed about their reunion,” she replied, looking a bit proud.

I turned to Oswald, who continued the explanation. “It is not normally used among family members who live together, but it may be heard during long-awaited reunions with someone who married into another duchy. Just like a first-time greeting, it is spoken by the person of lower status, so you will most likely receive it many times during the next winter playroom.”

The greeting wasn’t being used during our everyday trips to the playroom, but apparently it would play a more important role when it came around again next year. I would, of course, be on the receiving end; now that I had made it past my debut, I was going to be the next archduke. Charlotte, on the other hand, would probably be married into another duchy after coming of age, so she needed to learn all sorts of lengthy greetings.

“It must be rough, Charlotte, but do your best,” I said, trying to encourage her through the many hardships she was going to face.

Charlotte’s indigo eyes blinked several times, then she smiled at me. “Yes, I will do the best I can. Will you be playing with us today, Brother?”

“Yeah. Rozemyne asked me to read you two some picture books, and Mother told me to play karuta with you.”

I turned to Oswald, who had the box containing the karuta and picture books. Melchior had been hiding behind his retainer since our arrival, but he came over when he realized there were toys. His face looked a lot like Mother’s, but he had Father’s hair, which made me a little jealous. As he had turned three years old, he was no longer wearing lumpy diapers. He was also now walking like a normal person.

“Glad to see you’re doing well, Melchior,” I said. “Last time I saw you, you were uneasy on your feet and always looked close to tumbling. Now you seem pretty good at walking.”

“Brother,” he replied. “The Goddess of Time’s, um... threads... have... meeting! Granted!”

Melchior had probably intended to give the same greeting as Charlotte, who was watching him with a proud smile, but he hadn’t managed it at all. Shouldn’t his attendants have made sure he was able to say it in preparation for our meeting? Maybe his education was a bit insufficient, in which case I would need to inform Mother. Letting him drag behind would only make things harder for him

down the line—something I understood all too well.

He may need a change of retainers, like what Rozemyne pushed for with me.

As children of the archduke, we went to the northern building as soon as we were baptized, so Mother and Father took care of our retainers before then. But I needed to be completely sure that Melchior was going to be okay.

As I was mulling over the situation, Oswald spurred me on. “Rather than standing there with such a serious frown, why not begin playing karuta?”

I took the cards from him, then looked over at Charlotte and said, “Right. This is karuta, a game that Rozemyne invented. It’s really useful for memorizing the names of gods and the divine instruments. It makes greetings easier to learn too. It was by using these cards that I was able to remember the names of the gods.”

After showing a demonstration of the game with my retainers, I invited Charlotte to play with me. And soon enough—

“You’re so fast, Brother!”

“Heh. The world of games is harsh. Status means nothing, and you can only count on your skill. If you don’t practice a lot, then you’ll lose to everyone in the winter playroom.”

I’d gone all out, just like Rozemyne always did with me, and effortlessly emerged victorious. There was no way I was going to lose here when I could usually win in the playroom. Charlotte seemed really frustrated about losing and was glaring at the karuta, her shoulders slumped. I knew exactly how she felt; it had been annoying beyond words when Rozemyne kept beating me.

“I want karuta like this too,” Charlotte said. “Why does Mother only ever...?”

“Mother didn’t give this to me; I got it from Rozemyne for studying. She said she’d only be able to prepare enough for the kids in the playroom, so I guess Mother and Father will need to wait until winter to buy a set for you. But, um... I *think* she said something about selling a picture book during the summer.”

I could vaguely remember Rozemyne mentioning that she wanted to sell a picture book about the subordinate gods when all the nobles came to the castle for the Starbinding.

Charlotte placed a hand on her chest and sighed in relief. “If we can buy books in the summer, then I can study before the winter playroom.”

“And you can play with me until you get your own karuta. I’ve been told to come here as often as I can during the Archduke Conference. I’ll always accept your challenges.”

“My... challenges?” Charlotte repeated, tilting her head at me. All of my friends in the playroom understood me when I said that, so why did she look so confused...? I racked my brain for a moment, and then it hit me—she didn’t know anything about the playroom. It was frustrating when communication wasn’t as simple as it was with my retainers.

“Charlotte, you’ll get good too if you practice lots. I got a lot better after playing with my friends in the winter playroom. Though I never managed to win against Rozemyne...”

Even after coming up with so many schemes, I hadn’t managed to beat her a single time before the end of winter. It was a frustrating thing to admit, but I was so close; I would win during the next winter playroom for sure. My friends and I had vowed to defeat her before saying our farewells, so I could guess they were practicing karuta and cards at this very moment.

“Understood, Brother. Let us play again.”

“Right. I won’t hold back, y’know.”

Charlotte was motivated, and we all started playing... but Melchior just kept getting in the way.

“I got iiii!”

“You didn’t!” I exclaimed. “That was the wrong one! And you haven’t gotten any cards yet, so one of your retainers has to give one up in your place!”

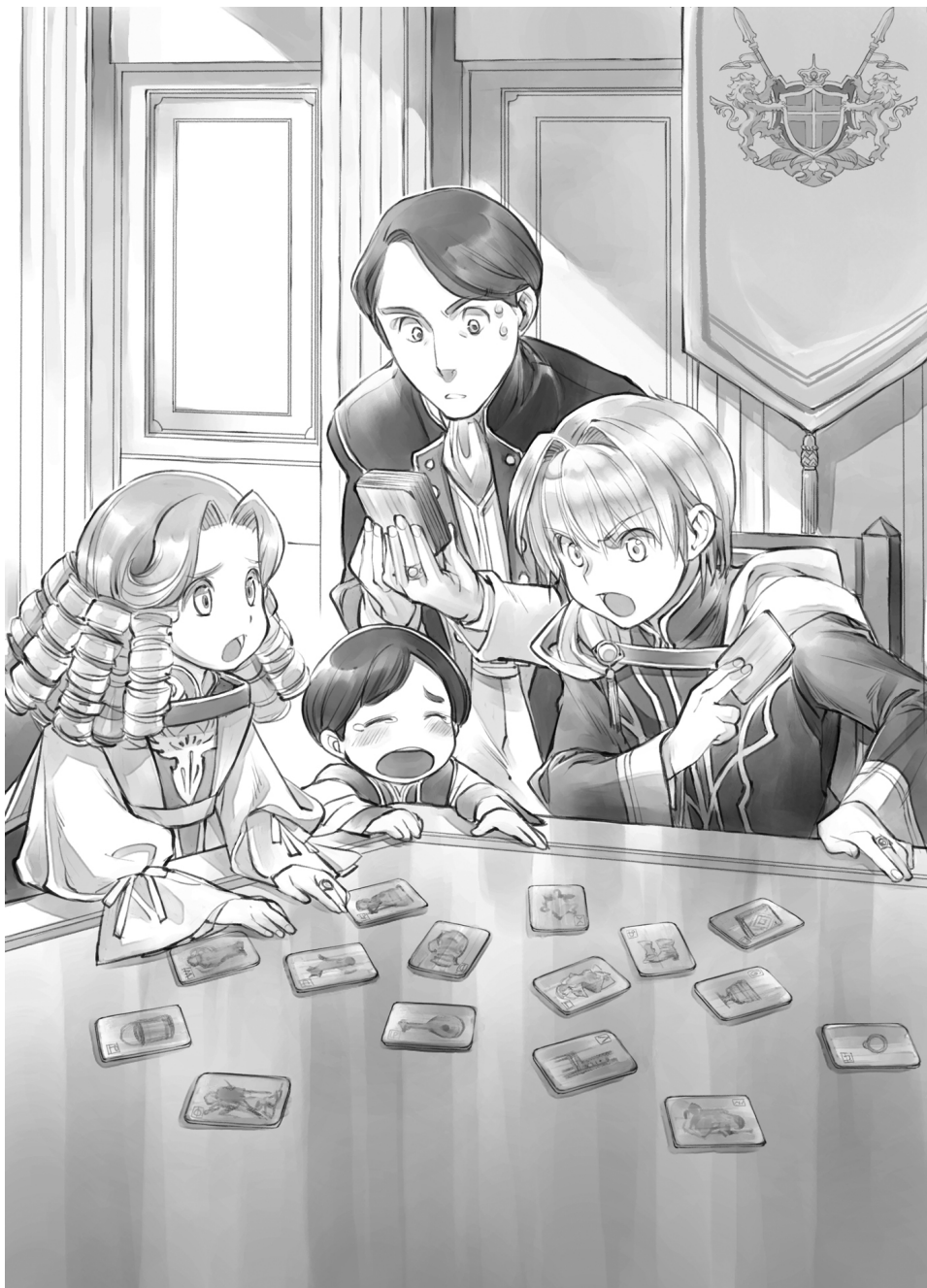
I tried to get Melchior to give back the card, but he shouted, “No!” and tried to hide it. We couldn’t play while he was doing that.

“Come on, Melchior,” I said. “Don’t be selfish. You need to put it back!” I snatched the cards away from him, and immediately he started crying—not that it would change anything.

“Brother, could you not let Melchior have at least one?” Charlotte asked.

“This is a serious match. We can’t be soft on him. If he doesn’t know the rules, then we have to teach him. And if he won’t learn the words, then he can’t be allowed to play.”

“Brother... Melchior is still only three years old.”



“So what? Everyone always says it’s important to be stern with the archduke’s children, so why should we be soft on Melchior? Mother asked me to teach you two as your big brother. I’m just giving you the same treatment that Rozemyne gives me.”

Oswald stepped forward and smiled at Charlotte, Melchior, and their retainers. “Lady Charlotte, Lord Melchior, because Lord Wilfried was raised in the eastern building and not in the main building as you were, he has no experience interacting with young children. He knows almost nothing about them.”

He then turned to me and crouched down so we were face-to-face. “You have already been baptized while Lord Melchior is only three—you cannot hold him to the same standards you hold yourself. You would not want others to expect you to perform at the level of an adult, would you? And you told us not to compare your progress to that of Lady Rozemyne.”

He was right. It was unreasonable of me to expect a three-year-old to act my age.

“Sorry, Melchior,” I said. “It looks like I was wrong. But, er... Oswald, what standards *should* I hold him to?”

“That is a question you must ask his retainers. The expectations placed on a child slowly develop as that child grows. You, yourself, have come a long way since last year, have you not?”

I nodded, then decided that I would ask about Melchior over tea and sweets. One of his retainers gave him a sweet, and immediately he went from crying his eyes out to being all smiles.

“Lord Melchior enjoys hearing stories,” another retainer explained. “Perhaps he would enjoy the picture book you brought more than the karuta?”

It was settled, then; I would read to him after finishing my tea.

“You know how to read, Brother?” Charlotte asked.

“Yeah. You’ll need to learn before your debut,” I replied, then took the picture book from Oswald. It was the one about the two supreme gods and the Eternal Five, which I pretty much knew by heart after reading it so many times.

I spread the book open in front of Charlotte and Melchior, like Rozemyne and my retainers had always done when reading to me, and then began.

“This story begins long, long ago—before the gods performed

their legendary deeds, and even before the two supreme gods married one another. The God of Darkness was in a pitch-black abyss...”

As I continued, Charlotte and Melchior stared at the picture book with wide eyes.

“And so, Ewigeliebe the God of Life gained power, stole Geduldh the Goddess of Earth, and froze her so that she could only be touched by those who received his harsh judgment. Geduldh’s siblings would need to build up their strength to regain new life once again... which is why the seasons come and go. The end.”

Melchior let out a cry of happiness, while Charlotte looked at me, impressed. “So you truly have learned to read, Brother.”

“Heh. Impressive, right?” I said. “I’m something else, but Rozemyne’s even more impressive.”

“Rozemyne... Just what kind of person is my elder sister? Please do tell.”

After stressing how extremely hard I’d been working since autumn, I went on to describe how amazing Rozemyne was. I noted that she was just like a teacher but even more harsh, which made Charlotte’s expression cloud over.

“So, she is obsessed with books and has been forcing your retainers to resign one after another?” Charlotte eventually summarized. “She sounds much scarier than when Mother described her. Will she really want to be my friend...?”

Before I could say another word, Lamprecht grimaced and put a hand on my shoulder. “Lord Wilfried, if I may... You appear to have given Lady Charlotte the wrong impression.”

The wrong impression? I understood that he was Rozemyne’s older brother, but there was no “wrong impression” to give. I was describing things exactly as they’d happened.

I was going to protest, but then I saw Linhardt wearing a half-smile out of the corner of my eye. Melchior’s and Charlotte’s retainers were already muttering about Rozemyne. On second thought, maybe I *had* exaggerated a little. I would need to reconsider my phrasing.

“Lamprecht’s right,” I said. “Rozemyne isn’t scary. She’s just passionate about studying and really harsh. In the winter playroom, she didn’t seem to dislike anyone in particular, so the two of you will probably become fast friends. She never holds back in games,

but she's really fond of girls who like books."

I even explained my work leading the boys in the playroom while Rozemyne led the girls. We'd done really well, even getting some praise from the attendant in charge... but rather than commending my hard work, Charlotte's eyes wavered.

"Does she like or dislike anything other than books?" she asked.

"Umm... I don't really know. But I *do* know that she doesn't have much stamina. You won't believe how weak she is, and she collapses all the time. She's got plenty of mana, though. In fact, she's been helping me supply the foundation, and even when I'm exhausted from emptying feystones, she continues like it's nothing."

But the more I spoke about Rozemyne, the more uneasy Charlotte seemed to get. Was I giving her the wrong impression again or exaggerating too much? Was I making Rozemyne sound overly harsh? As I thought back on what I'd said, Charlotte took my hands in hers.

"Do you like her, Brother? Is she someone you consider likable?"

I couldn't keep making my sister feel anxious, so I gave a big nod. "Don't worry, Charlotte. I know you're worried about your upcoming baptism and debut, but you'll be fine. I'm here for you."

As her elder brother, I'll do everything I can for her!

I gave Charlotte's hand a reassuring squeeze, but that just made her look *even more* uneasy for some reason. Confused, I turned around and saw that Lamprecht had a distant look in his eyes.

"Huh...?"

Upon returning to my room, I was told that I should have praised Rozemyne more. I thought I'd done a good job of describing her strengths, but apparently it wasn't that easy.

The next day, on top of all my other work, I was tasked with learning to praise people. Apparently, I needed to ease Charlotte's worries before winter.

This is all Rozemyne's fault! Nothing I said about her was untrue, so why am I getting the blame?!

Cornelius — A Miserable Morning Full of Regret

A previously unpublished chapter set near the end of Part 3 Volume 5, posted online in a collection of disconnected short stories. Cornelius, overcome with regret after failing to protect Rozemyne and catch the true culprit, has a thought-provoking conversation with his mother.

Author's Note: This started out as the beginning of the sales bonus for Part 3 Volume 5, but it got cut when the story became too long. As you can see, I ended up turning it into its own little chapter. You could (somewhat loosely) call this the first part of the *next* short story in this book, "To Protect My Little Sister."

"Cornelius," Lord Ferdinand said to me, "if you are truly sorry, capture those who harmed Rozemyne."

I nodded, then went with Grandfather to apprehend the criminal. We followed a rott to Angelica, who had managed to restrain Viscount Joisontak, then I went off to inform Father and the aub that we had completed our objective. After failing Rozemyne so greatly, I had managed to atone for my mistake, even if only slightly.

Or so I thought. Following an interrogation by Aub Ehrenfest himself, it was confirmed that Viscount Joisontak had invaded the northern building and kidnapped Charlotte—but he hadn't been the one to attack Rozemyne.

In short, I still haven't caught the criminal. I haven't done anything!

As time went on, that knowledge weighed more and more heavily on my soul. I tossed and turned in bed, unable to find peace even in the pitch-black darkness. It was making my overnight attendant very concerned.

In the dark, where I was unable to sleep despite my best efforts, awful thoughts came to mind unbidden. I could still see Rozemyne, unconscious in Lord Ferdinand's arms. She was wrapped in cloth, but her face, ashen and covered in scratches, still peeked out from among its folds. Her skin was normally quite pale, but now it was deathly white, as if she were no longer with us. The fact that she wasn't even reacting to the potion-soaked rag in her mouth only added to my worries.

At the same time, I remembered seeing Rozemyne during her baptism ceremony, crumpled on the floor and covered in blood. Both then and now, I had failed in my duty to protect her.

Will she be okay?

That was my only thought. Lord Ferdinand had said during Viscount Joisontak's interrogation that she would survive, but after seeing the look in his eyes as he inspected our surroundings, I couldn't help but imagine that she was in a terrible state.

Viscount Joisontak had mentioned receiving his soldiers from Viscount Gerlach, so the aub and the Knight's Order were now directing their attention at him. This meant I was unable to find out any more about Rozemyne's condition or the details of the situation.

If only I'd stayed with her and not Lady Charlotte...

I had been completely focused on saving Lady Charlotte and Angelica, so I hadn't seen the moment Rozemyne's highbeast was captured. Instead, I'd only heard her scream while I was detouring through the sky above the forest, satisfied and relieved about having made it in time. I'd frantically looked around, only to see her highbeast ensnared in light and being dragged down into the forest. Then, the trees had started swaying far in the distance.

And after I was told that a guard knight should never take their eyes off their charge, not even for a single moment, no matter the circumstances...

It had only been for a brief window—not even ten seconds—but that was all it had taken for Rozemyne to end up in danger. I hadn't been able to understand what was happening at first. Fear dulled my senses, and my blood ran cold. My breath caught in my throat, and my vision flashed white.

I'd wanted nothing more than to race to Rozemyne's rescue, but abandoning Lady Charlotte wasn't an option. I asked Angelica to stop channeling mana into her enhancements and Stenluke so that

she could produce her highbeast, then left Lady Charlotte in her care while I tried to pursue the kidnapper.

But by that point, it was too late. Rozemyne didn't respond no matter how much I called for her.

At the very least, if we knew who was responsible, I could capture them...

I wouldn't forgive the criminal who had put Rozemyne through so much suffering. Was it actually Viscount Gerlach, whom Viscount Joisontak had spoken about?

I need to capture them with my own two hands, as soon as possible.

Racked with feelings of powerlessness, regret, and anger toward the criminal, I squeezed my eyes shut. I needed to fall asleep as soon as I could.

My attendant urged me out of bed, but I didn't feel rested at all; I'd started awake several times in the night, and not once had I managed to fall into a deep sleep.

Despite my exhaustion, I got up and went to have breakfast. Today was the day of Viscount Gerlach's interrogation, and I needed to attend—as a guard, but also to get some emotional closure.

By the time I arrived at the dining hall, Mother had already finished eating. "Oh, Cornelius," she said. "You are up early this morning."

"I couldn't sleep."

One of the attendants poured me a hot drink. I watched the liquid as it swirled in my cup, then took a sip. Immediately, the warmth of the beverage spread through my chest.

For breakfast, I was served some bread with a side of tanieh cream. Mother was sipping her tea, not reacting at all, but the gesture wasn't lost on me. Tanieh cream was my favorite, but she had forbidden me from having it without her permission ever since autumn, when I'd eaten it on a daily basis. For her to have prepared some for me now meant she must have been worried about me.

I spread the tanieh cream on my bread and then took a big bite. Its delicious sweetness helped to raise my spirits... but then I remembered that it had been Rozemyne who gave me the recipe in the first place, and the storm of emotions that had been swirling through my head since last night bubbled up out of me.

"Mother, I'm Rozemyne's apprentice guard knight, but I

couldn't protect her when it mattered most. I should have stayed with her instead of rescuing Lady Charlotte. That was my duty..."

"Cornelius... I understand how you feel. But it was Rozemyne who told you to save Lady Charlotte, was it not?"

I nodded. Mother was right. Under normal circumstances, I would have left Lady Charlotte's rescue to her guard knights and the Knight's Order; it was only because Rozemyne had flown off to save her that I'd taken action as well. As merciless as that may have seemed, it was the duty of a guard knight to protect their lord or lady.

Mother's dark eyes sharpened ever so slightly. "Then refrain from speaking or acting in ways that suggest you regret rescuing Lady Charlotte. If anyone should feel responsible, it should be Lady Charlotte's own guard knights, who could not handle the black-clad soldiers and failed to protect their lady from danger."

Her words were as harsh as one would expect from the first wife of the knight commander—but she could only say that because she had not seen the situation herself. Thinking back to how many enemies had appeared and how everyone had been positioned, it would have been near impossible for Lady Charlotte's guard knights to manage alone.

As I thought back to the trained movements of the black-clad soldiers, I started moving gewinnen pieces around in my mind. Theoretically, if we had attacked the three soldiers who ambushed Lady Charlotte, Angelica and I would have ended up fighting one each, while the third would have gotten to Rozemyne unopposed.

Though she wouldn't have been picked up and carried away like Lady Charlotte, since she was in her highbeast.

"You aren't wrong, Mother—but I don't believe you are entirely correct either. I was there during the attack, and I can say in good conscience that Lady Charlotte's guard knights did not act incompetently."

"If you are capable of such rational analysis, Cornelius, then think not of what has happened but of what is to come," Mother said, bringing her teacup to her lips once again. "Lord Ferdinand said that Rozemyne will awake, though perhaps not anytime soon, so we can rest easy knowing she is safe." It annoyed me how casually she was speaking.

I stabbed my fork into the bacon I was served. "Lord Ferdinand did not give any details as to her condition. It is not like you to

naively trust someone, Mother.” Both she and Eckhart placed too much faith in Lord Ferdinand, in my opinion.

“Oh my...” Mother said. She covered her mouth with one hand and gave a refined giggle. “Lord Ferdinand always speaks as ambiguously as possible to keep his own words from being used against him, yet he said in no uncertain terms that Rozemyne will survive. She will be safe in his hands.” She sighed, then continued in a quieter voice, “Though, I admit, we do not know how long her recovery will take... Lord Bonifatius is furious about her being kept in the temple, but Lord Ferdinand considers it for the best, and I trust his judgment.”

“But why?” I asked. “If her condition really has stabilized, should she not be moved somewhere more secure? The temple is primarily staffed with gray priests, and there are so few guards stationed there.”

As far as I was aware, Rozemyne only had two guard knights who could enter the temple: Damuel and Brigitte. Lord Ferdinand only had one: Eckhart. With so few capable fighters at their disposal, what did they plan to do in the event of another attack?

“Perhaps, but nobles generally do not go there. Rozemyne, Lord Ferdinand, and their retainers are the only exceptions, which makes it much easier to protect Rozemyne from those who would try to harm her under the guise of a visit. Do you not agree?”

Mother went on to explain that, according to Eckhart, there was a hidden room in the temple that Ferdinand often used. Rozemyne was being kept inside, and moving her anywhere else would potentially be more dangerous. Mother told me all this coolly—which was far from amusing when I’d spent all night worrying myself sick.

“You certainly are calm, Mother, considering all that has happened.”

“I am not calm. Rozemyne, who has come to be known as the Leisegangs’ greatest hope, is at death’s door. The very thought of all the fretting I will need to deal with gives me a pounding headache.”

The Leisegangs had spent years under Lady Veronica’s thumb—and now they were pinning all of their hopes on Rozemyne. In their eyes, the future of their house rested on her very shoulders.

We had thus far kept Rozemyne’s meetings with other nobles to an absolute minimum, since she was sickly and unaccustomed to society’s expectations, but we had planned for that to change this

winter. We were going to have her meet with the giebels in her family as socializing practice while at the same time spreading the printing and paper-making industries. She would have unified the Leisegangs, gotten them involved in the new industries, established their superiority over the former Veronica faction...

Now, however, their hopes were crushed—and in more ways than one. I could imagine their outrage all too clearly.

“Well... I can see why this is going to be difficult for you,” I remarked.

“Why are you acting like this is not your problem as well, Cornelius? You will need to interact with their children in the playroom and the Royal Academy. You would do well to speak with Lord Karstedt and the aub before then so that you know what information to hide and what to spread.”

I could already imagine the Leisegang children bombarding me with questions. Last year had already taught me that Rozemyne had drawn a lot of attention to herself.

Mother continued, “Under these circumstances, I do not expect your father to be able to leave the castle. He will probably be living in the knight dormitory for some time. If you visit him to discuss what I mentioned, could you ask whom we are considering as the next Giebe Joisontak? The province borders Gerlach, so it will prove critical for upcoming socializing events.”

“Regardless of whether I visit the Knight’s Order, I do not think Father will have time to discuss something so personal...”

Anyone who spent a year as an apprentice guard knight would be able to guess how much work the knight commander was having to endure right now. At the very beginning of winter socializing, when nobles from every province were coming together, an Ehrenfest noble had attacked the archducal family. A personal meeting was out of the question.

“Well, I ask only that you keep it in mind, should the opportunity arise. The more means of gathering intelligence we have, the better. For now... I will tell Eckhart and Lamprecht to come home for dinner today.”

I knew it. Mother is calm, cool, and collected.

Seeing her contemplate whom she would ask to obtain intelligence on the state of the archducal family made me feel that I was still immature, as both a noble and a guard knight.

Cornelius — To Protect My Little Sister

The sales bonus for Part 3 Volume 5. Cornelius finds out he isn't the only one who feels responsible for Rozemyne getting attacked, and a secret conversation with Hartmut leads to a very unexpected revelation.

Author's Note: I wanted to write about Cornelius's friendships—something that isn't really seen from Rozemyne's perspective. This short story includes a conversation between her future retainers, as well as an illustration that I requested of them all when they were younger. They're so cute! Oh, and if you're reading these chapters in order, prepare for a little *déjà vu*: some of the dialogue that was originally cut from this story (and went on to become "A Miserable Morning Full of Regret") ended up being worked into the lunch meeting scene.

"You don't look so good, Cornelius... Couldn't sleep?" Damuel asked me, sounding worried.

It was the day after the Viscount Joisontak incident, and I'd arrived at the room in the castle reserved for the Knight's Order. I gazed up at Damuel, unsure how to respond, and saw that he looked just as beaten. It seemed that neither one of us had gotten any rest.

To be honest, it was nice to know that I wasn't the only one agonizing over my failure.

I sighed. "If I hadn't raced off to rescue Lady Charlotte, I could have stayed with Lady Rozemyne and stopped all this from happening. I was up half the night thinking about it."

"Cornelius," Brigitte said, "that's—"

"I know. Staying with Rozemyne wasn't an option; Lady

Charlotte and Angelica would have gotten badly injured—or worse. Mother told me this morning that Lady Charlotte’s guard knights are largely to blame, which made me feel a little better... but I still think I could have done something to save Rozemyne from this danger.”

I didn’t want to believe that saving them had been a mistake, but I was Rozemyne’s guard knight. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I should have prioritized her safety above all else.

“You feel so responsible because Lady Rozemyne is your little sister as well,” Brigitte noted, then gave me a gentle pat on the shoulder. “That said, all this regret is bad for your health. It will only serve to make those around you even more worried.”

I recalled something Mother had told me about Brigitte—that her decision to cancel her engagement had put her home province, Illgner, in very dire straits. She likely knew my feelings of guilt firsthand.

“I heard your call for Lady Rozemyne to stop when she charged off on her own,” Brigitte continued. “For a guard knight to protect their lord or lady above all else, a degree of cooperation is needed. In the heat of the moment, you followed Lady Rozemyne’s orders and acted as was appropriate.”

“Is that really true, though...?”

“Yes. Do you remember what Lady Rozemyne shouted when you succeeded in your rescue maneuver? Plus, as I understand it, she always prioritizes others above herself. I am sure she would have been distraught if you had abandoned Lady Charlotte.”

I recalled the look on Rozemyne’s face when she had raced to save her sister, and the desperation in her eyes when she had begged me to save Lady Charlotte and Angelica. But that wasn’t all—I also remembered the jubilation with which she had called my name when my rescue attempt proved successful, and my own pride at having granted her wish.

That’s right. Rozemyne wanted to rescue them.

“Brigitte is right,” a familiar voice added. “There’s no reason for you to beat yourself up over this, Cornelius.”

“Angelica...”

“Were I able to use my highbeast while strengthening myself, Lady Rozemyne would never have been in danger...”

I could tell from Angelica’s downcast eyes that guilt was eating away at her just as it was me. Perhaps my words had backed her

into even more of a corner. I racked my brain, trying to think of a way to console her... but when she looked up again, she looked completely unperturbed.

“However, there’s no use crying over something that was out of my control. I just need to work hard so I don’t have that same constraint next time—that’s what Lord Bonifatius said. I became his disciple to grow stronger, and next time, I *will* protect Lady Rozemyne, no matter what.”

I had wondered what insanity compelled Angelica to train as Grandfather’s disciple, but I could see now that there was a method to her madness. She was being so optimistic and constructive... whereas I had spent the night agonizing before coming to no meaningful conclusions whatsoever.

“I agree; we should train hard so that we can do more for Rozemyne,” I said. “I see that I have a lot to learn from you.”

I had no intention of making the same mistake twice. To protect my little sister, I needed to be better. Plus, it would definitely wound my pride if Angelica ended up stronger and more reliable than me by the time Rozemyne woke up.

“Seems you’ve calmed down, Cornelius,” Brigitte said with a relieved smile, then looked at Damuel. “Let’s go to Rihyarda, then. We need to check our schedule for today.”

“Viscount Gerlach’s due to be questioned soon. Hopefully we can confirm he was the criminal who attacked Lady Rozemyne...”

We nodded at Damuel, then all went to see Rihyarda. As I thought about the upcoming interrogation, my hands instinctively balled into tight fists. If it turned out that Gerlach *was* the culprit, I would make him pay then and there in the questioning room.

“You are not allowed to attend today’s questioning.”

“Hold on, Rihyarda—why not?!” Brigitte protested. “We’re Lady Rozemyne’s guard knights!”

I gave a firm nod of agreement. We had been allowed to attend when Viscount Joisontak was questioned, so this made absolutely no sense.

“Giebe Joisontak was captured at the scene of the crime, so the archducal family’s guard knights were permitted to spectate,” Rihyarda explained. “Giebe Gerlach, on the other hand, has only been mentioned by name. The Knight’s Order has also confirmed that he was in the grand hall at the time of the incident. He is

unlikely to be the culprit, which is why attendance is so limited.”

“But, Rihyarda...”

Brigitte attempted to object, but Rihyarda raised a hand to stop her. “Allow me to speak more plainly: there is too great of a risk that you young’uns will lose control and automatically label Giebe Gerlach a criminal, even when we have no evidence. We cannot have you causing even further problems.”

I pursed my lips, unable to argue. I was well aware that I wasn’t as commonsensical as usual—especially after my conversation with Brigitte.

“What is our schedule for today, then?”

“Aub Ehrenfest and my boy Ferdinand visited the winter playroom after breakfast, whereupon they instructed Wilfried and Charlotte to manage the winter playroom. You are to assist them with their efforts.”

We weren’t serving Lord Wilfried or Lady Charlotte, so I didn’t see why we needed to help them.

Rihyarda must have noticed the furrow in my brow, as she gave a half-smile and said, “This is going to be Lady Charlotte’s first time in the winter playroom, and Lord Wilfried was not particularly focused on its management last year. In other words, they will struggle on their own. Lady Rozemyne also made quite a few changes to how the winter playroom operates, and the attendants there are simply not used to her methods.”

They needed our help because, as Rozemyne’s retainers, we had seen her work up close and assisted with her various preparations. Angelica and I were going to be spending most of our time in the Royal Academy, though, so it was unlikely that we would be of much help.

“Lady Rozemyne was very invested in the managing of the winter playroom—so much so that she wrote a letter about it,” Rihyarda continued. “Her wish is that it will smoothly continue down the same path while she sleeps.”

“Understood. She may not be here to give orders, but if she put her wishes in a letter, it is our duty to fulfill them.”

I went to the playroom and got Lady Charlotte to show us Rozemyne’s letter. It contained a bunch of instructions, as well as details on what she wanted done in the playroom. Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte were clearly working hard to make up for their

sibling's absence, and seeing their valiant efforts made me want to do my best too.

As Rozemyne's guard knight, the least I can do is make sure the winter playroom doesn't return to what it was like before.

But no matter how much I resolved myself to do that, Angelica and I would be spending most of the winter in the Royal Academy. How would we be able to help with the winter playroom?

As it turned out, Rozemyne had the answer. In her letter, she asked for students to start gathering intelligence on other duchies and creating study guides for the various courses. Angelica and I were going to oversee these efforts—except Angelica was slowly but surely backing out of the conversation. I really wished she wouldn't use her talents as a knight to disappear from sight the moment she lost interest.

Alright. Let's not trust Angelica with gathering information.

Anyone who thought she might buckle down and use her head was sorely mistaken. I had plenty of battle scars from my tour of duty in the Raise Angelica's Grades Squadron, and it was because of my experience with her that I immediately gave up on seeking her assistance and instead decided to cooperate with Lord Wilfried's and Lady Charlotte's underage retainers.

"I do not mind giving reports on what we learn," Ernesta said, "but should you not be speaking to those of the scholar course? It is not a knight's duty to gather intelligence."

"You make a good point," I replied, "but we want to cast as wide a net as we can. That's why we should all work together instead of leaving everything to the scholars."

"Right. And, as those who provide the most valuable intelligence will be handsomely compensated, it makes sense that people other than scholars will offer their assistance."

During our conversation, Lady Charlotte received first-time greetings from those in the playroom. The line stretching out in front of her was far from short, so it was obvious she was going to be busy for quite some time. In the meantime, the adult retainers were speaking with the teachers, musicians, and so on. Rihyarda and Otilie were helping with management preparations, while Damuel and Brigitte would apparently be leading temple-related work such as the preparation of new picture books.

Lord Wilfried was currently telling the other children everything he was allowed to disclose about last night's incident.

After the Knight's Order blocked all of the exits from the grand hall, the attending nobles had all been checked and then swiftly ordered to return home. As a result, they knew nothing except that an attack had occurred.

"And then, Lord Bonifatius, Cornelius, and Angelica brought back the criminal. To our surprise, the black-clad man who kidnapped Charlotte was Viscount Joisontak."

"Whaaat?!"

The children were eagerly listening to the story. Viscount Joisontak had admitted to his crimes after being captured, so his family had presumably been found guilty by association. A quick look around seemed to confirm my suspicions: the Joisontak kids, who had been here last year, were nowhere to be seen.

"So it was Lady Angelica and Lord Cornelius who rescued Lady Charlotte?" asked one of the children—a boy called Matthias. "I'm going to be a knight myself, so I wish I'd been there to see it."

"I *also* want to become a knight and do those things!"

"You too, Lady Judithe?"

"That's right! I'll become a knight like Lady Angelica and protect Kirnberger's country gate. You're Lady Angelica's little sister, right, Lady Lieseleta? Will you become a knight too?"

Lieseleta shook her head. "My house is well known for producing attendants. I will become one as well and serve Lady Rozemyne alongside my sister. Um, hopefully..."

"That's so wonderful!"

Among the children listening to the stories of our battle was none other than the son of Viscount Gerlach, the man under interrogation at that very moment. Despite his father's predicament, he seemed just as excited as the other kids. He looked particularly relieved when Lord Wilfried mentioned that the culprit had been caught, then started discussing strong knights with the son of Viscount Wiltord. I couldn't tell whether his nonchalance was because Viscount Gerlach was innocent or because he simply hadn't brought his son into his schemes.

"Why the long face, Cornelius?"

"Hartmut..."



“If you need intel from the Royal Academy, why not ask me? C’mon, we’re friends.”

Hartmut and I had been friends since we were little, owing to our mothers getting along so well. He had red hair and bright orange eyes—a combination that really made him stand out in a crowd—and, like any noble worth his salt, always wore an approachable smile that revealed absolutely nothing about his true feelings. He also had more connections than anyone else I got along with.

Of course, he had his faults as well. He tended to be annoyingly casual, and there was a particular coldness to his warm-colored eyes. It was also rare to see him show an interest in something—which was why I found it so unusual that he was poking his nose into a conversation about generic intelligence-gathering.

I was surprised, but then I saw Brunhilde and Leonore behind him—Leisegangs. There were other nobles similarly looking in our direction. They were mobilizing to get more information about Rozemyne.

“This is a conversation between retainers,” I said. “Can we speak later?”

“Perfect. Lady Elvira just sent me an invitation to have lunch with you all.”

I wasn’t told about that...

Mother had said during breakfast that winter was going to be tough, but she hadn’t said that we were going to have lunch with guests. She was evidently working in the shadows, beyond my notice. It was going to be even harder for me to guess her intentions once I returned to the Royal Academy, since contacting one’s parents became much less simple, so I would need to learn what she was doing before then.

“How about we talk over lunch, then?” Hartmut suggested. “It should be a little more leisurely than if we spoke here and now.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

With that, Hartmut walked away, with Brunhilde and Leonore following after him. They appeared to be discussing something among themselves—no doubt trying to decide which questions to ask me.

This is going to be annoying...

It was fourth bell—lunchtime.

As some nobles went home to eat, lunch in general was longer than dinnertime, lasting an entire bell instead of merely half of one. I wasn't an attendant, meaning I didn't need to serve anyone food, so I could choose between eating in the castle or at home when I wasn't on guard duty.

Today, I was going to be eating at home. I mounted my highbeast and took flight, with Otilie and Hartmut accompanying me.

"Apologies, Cornelius," Otilie said. "This lunch meeting took you by surprise, did it not?"

"It truly did."

"Now that we know Lady Rozemyne will not wake up anytime soon, there is a need to speak with Lady Elvira before the Leisegang house mobilizes. However..." Otilie glanced at her son. She was the picture of a mother looking at a problematic child, which told me that Hartmut had twisted her arm to come along to this lunch.

"Leisegang nobles will surely swarm us the moment we arrive at the Royal Academy," Hartmut continued with a smile, not at all bothered by his mother's stare. "We need to hold a meeting before then, no?"

"You intend to help me?" I asked.

"Yep. My real interest is this intelligence-gathering operation in the Royal Academy, but I don't mind offering some assistance as well, if the mood takes me." It was his way of confirming that he had no intention of helping me whatsoever.

On that note, we arrived at my family's home, where Mother welcomed us with a bemused smile. "I see Hartmut dragged you along after all, Cornelius."

"Wasn't this meeting already agreed upon?" I asked.

"Not at all. I merely said that I wished to spend some time in leisurely conversation with Otilie and that she should only bring Hartmut if you would be coming home as well, to keep him company. In the future, you must observe your surroundings and take more care to obtain information, my son."

My cheek twitched as we sat down for lunch; my naivety as a noble had just been thrown in my face.

During lunch meetings, attendants would busily move around to serve everyone, so only matters that were safe to be made public

were discussed. Otilie reported that Rozemyne was going to be asleep in her jureve for more than a year, at which point Mother put a troubled hand on her cheek and shook her head.

“Lord Ferdinand said during the questioning that she would survive, but to think it will take her that long simply to regain consciousness...”

Indeed, Rozemyne’s recovery period was far too long. The world around me started to grow dark, much like it had when I first heard of her situation in the castle. My understanding was that most people spent five days at most in a jureve.

“More than a year...” I repeated. “Do we know what kind of drug was used on Rozemyne?”

“Lord Ferdinand did not specify in fear that it might be used again,” Otilie replied, “but it seems to be lethal to Lady Rozemyne in particular. He said that if the rescue had come even a moment later, she likely would have ascended the towering stairway to the distant heights.”

Apparently, it was a drug that wouldn’t be fatal to most people—but to the sickly Rozemyne, it was. Otilie’s explanation made my anger toward the culprit swell more and more. But while I was getting increasingly furious, Mother remained calm.

“Rozemyne, the shining hope of the Leisegangs, was brought to death’s door...” she said casually while bringing some food to her mouth. “Just thinking about all the fretting I will need to deal with gives me a pounding headache.”

In truth, her attitude annoyed me a little. “I think you are being a bit cold, Mother. Lord Ferdinand did not give any details as to her condition. It is unlike you to trust someone so readily.”

“Lord Ferdinand always speaks ambiguously to keep his own words from being used against him, yet he made it very clear that Rozemyne will survive. I trust that she will be safe in his care.”

Mother and Eckhart both put way too much faith in Lord Ferdinand. Have they forgotten that he was responsible for that bloody accident on the day of her baptism?!

Otilie had a distant look in her eye. “You were keeping her meetings with other nobles to an absolute minimum, correct? Because she was so unwell and unaccustomed to noble society. And now this, right before she was due to start meeting with the giebels in her family and spreading the printing and paper-making industries. I am aware that the latter turned out to be very

successful in Illgner.”

She certainly was abreast of the situation. I could only imagine she had spoken with Mother at some point already.

“There are many who were looking forward to formally meeting Rozemyne,” Otilie continued, “so getting through this winter will prove very difficult indeed.”

The Leisengangs had spent years under Lady Veronica’s thumb—and now they were pinning all of their hopes on Rozemyne. In their eyes, the future of their house rested on her very shoulders. Now that she was asleep in her jureve, however, those hopes had been scattered to the four winds. Their newly formed connection to the archducal family, adoption of new industries, and guarantees of future support—all these things would be on hold until Rozemyne woke up.

I imagined the inevitable looks of outrage from all those in our family who had joined together to eliminate the former Veronica faction, and immediately I understood why Mother had such a headache.

Great-Grandfather might despair so much that he ascends to the distant heights.

“Incidentally, Otilie... have any candidates been chosen to take over as the next Giebe Joisontak?” Mother asked.

“I was told that the Joisontak family has been imprisoned, but I received no news about their successors. I assume the selection will take place this winter. That said... Joisontak is filled with nobles of the former Veronica faction. The higher-ups have been racking their brains for a way to put a noble of the Leisegang faction in charge, but to no avail.”

Our meal ended while Mother and Otilie continued to share intelligence. They were going to move elsewhere and use sound-blocking magic tools to have a more in-depth conversation, so Hartmut and I were shooed away and told to wait in my room until fifth bell.

I couldn’t help but grimace at Hartmut’s scheming smile. *“Get along with one another,” they said. How can I get along with a guy like this?*

The moment we entered my room, Hartmut held out a sound-blocking magic tool, still wearing the same grin. He had always been kind of... aloof, and he seemed to look at everyone else like they were idiots, so it was seldom good news when he was keeping

something from the adults.

I glared between Hartmut and the magic tool, which made him cock an eyebrow at me. “This is about Lady Rozemyne,” he said teasingly. “Would you rather it become public knowledge?”

Having no other choice, I accepted the tool.

Hartmut walked over to the window with an exceptionally bright smile. He stared off into the distance for a moment, then turned to look straight at me, his eyes sharp and judgmental. “You and Angelica should have stayed with Lady Rozemyne instead of rescuing Lady Charlotte. You are a failure of a guard knight, are you not?”

Had he put that question to me this morning, I would have been at a loss for words—and when I had finished wavering, I would have agreed with him, crushed under the guilt of my own incompetence. But now, I didn’t believe his criticism in the slightest.

“It was Rozemyne’s wish for Lady Charlotte to be saved, and she was overjoyed when she saw that her little sister had been rescued,” I retorted. “Angelica and I both obeyed our lady’s orders and did the best that we could in the moment. For those reasons, I do not consider *either* of us to be failures—though that must be hard to accept for someone who doesn’t understand Rozemyne like we do.”

Hartmut’s face twisted in the most blatant grimace. I wasn’t sure why, when *he* had set the hostile tone of our conversation.

“Is that true, Cornelius?” he asked. “Lady Rozemyne wished to save Lady Charlotte?”

“It is. I shouted for her to wait, but she ignored me and rushed off with Angelica in her highbeast. If she had understood her position as an archducal family member and acted accordingly, I would have guarded her and her alone—even if the Knight’s Order had arrived late and Lady Charlotte were lost.”

It was a guard knight’s duty to protect their lord or lady above all else. Under most circumstances, we were not responsible for Lady Charlotte’s safety—she had her own guard knights, as did all members of the archducal family. But when our lady ordered us to look after her, well... that was an entirely different story.

“Did the two girls socialize before Lady Charlotte’s baptism...?” Hartmut asked.

“No. They had their first greetings at the end of autumn, when

Charlotte's room was being prepared in the northern building."

"You mean to say that Lady Rozemyne rushed headlong into danger for someone she barely even knows?" Hartmut moved over to a chair, perplexed, and sat on it with his legs crossed. I supposed that I should have offered him a seat sooner, but I still wished that he would act more like a proper guest.

"It might have been because she was raised in the temple," I said, taking a seat opposite him. "Although she's trained to carry herself as a proper member of the archducal family and gained plenty of knowledge through books, on some fundamental level, she's still a bit lacking in common sense. She doesn't always seem quite like a noble. Didn't you hear this from Otilie?"

Hartmut slowly shook his head. "She told me there have been absolutely no problems with her day-to-day behavior in the castle—that nothing about her suggests she was raised in the temple... But I see now that her true self sometimes shines through. I wonder, what further education might she need...?"

With that, he started to ponder something or another. I knew from experience that he would stay like this until he reached a conclusion he found satisfying, so I stood up, grabbed a board and pen, and started writing down this morning's decisions about gathering intelligence in the Royal Academy.

"Cornelius, as Lady Rozemyne's retainer and brother by blood, do you not think you lack the proper mindset and motivation for making her into the next aub?"

"What the...?"

That was his first question after spending so long lost in thought? He must have noticed my confusion because he launched into explaining himself.

"Lord Wilfried, who was raised by Lady Veronica and propped up to become the next archduke, was disgraced and pulled down from his position of guaranteed power at a time when one has to admit he had the blessing of Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time. And as for Lady Charlotte, she does not even pose a threat—not when Lady Rozemyne has such an abundance of mana, the profits from her new industries, and several new trends under her belt. As if that weren't enough, she also has the advantage of being a year older. Now is the time to help Lady Rozemyne become the next archduchess and..."

It was no surprise that we were using sound-blocking magic

tools; this wasn't a conversation we could risk our attendants overhearing. Did everyone in the family share his opinions? Just imagining it made my head ache.

"Hartmut. I hate to break it to you, but Rozemyne has no intention of becoming the next aub. Your grand ideas would also require Mother and Father to push aside one of Lady Florencia's children, which I doubt they would ever do. Mother is keeping her influence to a minimum, outside of mediating for the first wife."

Mother couldn't be too high-handed, else she would breed unnecessary conflict within the archducal family. It would be one thing if Rozemyne herself wanted to become the next aub, but I couldn't imagine Lord Sylvester wanting his position to go to someone who gleefully visited the temple even after her baptism.

"Still, Lady Rozemyne might as well be the princess of the Leisegangs," Hartmut said. "She can't ignore the will of an entire noble house. With their support, it's only a matter of time before she becomes aub."

"Er, that isn't necessarily the case... If the Leisegangs kick up too much of a fuss, Rozemyne will either be sent to the temple for good or married into another duchy. At the very least, I can't imagine Lord Sylvester letting a child who isn't Lady Florencia's become the next aub. Our family supports that notion as well."

As I saw it, Rozemyne had been spending so much time in the temple to show noble society that she had no intention of becoming the next aub. It was just like how Lord Ferdinand had entered the temple to avoid the nobles of the Veronica faction.

"Lady Rozemyne managed to escape the temple through her baptism, and now you mean to send her back?" Hartmut asked with a look of disgust.

I gave a half-smile. "She doesn't have a negative opinion of the temple, you know. I've been there with Father, and it isn't as bad as I was led to believe." There was great food, and the gray priests and shrine maidens serving as attendants were well trained. Rozemyne even seemed more at ease when she was in the temple—maybe because there were fewer nobles there.

"Hmm..." Hartmut mused aloud. "In that case, I should see the temple with my own eyes. Lady Rozemyne was raised there, after all. Perhaps it holds the key to securing a mana capacity large enough to bless an entire hall full of people during one's baptism."

"I don't know what you're thinking, but the temple is going to

be closed off to all nobles except Lord Ferdinand and Rozemyne's guard knights for quite some time." Letting anyone else visit would only make it easier for someone connected to the culprit to cause Rozemyne harm. Even the families of blue priests, the archducal couple, Grandfather, and our parents were forbidden from entering.

"Wait, hold on. It's been over a year now since I resolved to become Lady Rozemyne's retainer. I was going to start serving her this year. Can't you start treating me as part of her retinue?"

What...? Hartmut, becoming Rozemyne's retainer?

He *looked* serious, but was he really telling the truth? In all the years that I'd known Hartmut, never had he said something so bizarre before.

"I can't see a shred of sense in what you just said, but even if we did treat you as a retainer for some reason, you're still underage and can't visit the temple. Angelica and I aren't allowed to go either."

"That's rough. How can I be of use to Lady Rozemyne, then...?" Hartmut mused. He brushed up his scarlet bangs while staring into space again—but no matter how deep in thought he appeared to be, I needed to get to the bottom of this.

"Hartmut... do you seriously intend to serve Rozemyne as a retainer? Weren't you against your mother serving her?"

"At the time, I didn't know a thing about Lady Rozemyne," Hartmut admitted. He then let out a satisfied little chuckle, like he'd just remembered something amusing. I wasn't sure he understood the weight of what he was proposing. As an archnoble apprentice scholar, he would be committing himself to Rozemyne for the rest of his life. Unlike a female scholar, he wouldn't be able to resign for marriage or anything like that.

I grimaced. "Lamprecht invited you to serve Lord Wilfried, didn't he? Become his retainer instead."

"I already refused; a subordinate of summer cannot become a subordinate of spring. That aside, Cornelius—weren't you set on leaving Lady Rozemyne's service when she grew old enough to pick her own retainers? She may be your little sister, but that seems out of line to me. I don't believe all this about her not wanting to become the next aub either."

Hartmut was glaring at me, but I wasn't about to back down. I had resolved to make sure that Rozemyne was never put in harm's way again. Now that I knew there were more criminals after her,

how could I resign as her guard knight?

“Do you think I would step down when people like you are trying to sneak into the ranks of her retainers? Rozemyne is my little sister; I *will* protect her. Shouldn’t you be trying to work out what you’ll do when she doesn’t pick you?”

“That’s rich coming from someone who doesn’t have the strength *or* the grades expected of Lady Rozemyne’s brother,” Hartmut shot back with a mocking smile. But his words only steeled my resolve: I would keep this dangerous lunatic away from her at all costs. I would also secure grades that put me above the archnoble average—grades that would shut Hartmut up for good. Luckily, thanks to having studied in the Raise Angelica’s Grades Squadron, my classes this year were going to be easy.

Just you wait, Hartmut.

Thus began my battle to protect Rozemyne from all sorts of danger.

Hirschur — Special Accommodations

A short story that takes place between Part 3 Volume 5 and Part 4 Volume 1, originally written as a sales bonus for the latter. Hirschur receives a special request from Ehrenfest, which brings to mind thoughts of her duchy and her disciple.

Author's Note: How was Rozemyne's long slumber seen by those not in Ehrenfest? In this chapter, I decided to write a bit about what dormitory supervisors do when they're not, well, supervising their dormitories! I hope you enjoy seeing a side of Hirschur that Rozemyne doesn't experience as a student.

In preparation for my most recent brew, I set down my practice wooden board, the surface of which was all rough and dented from extensive use. On it was a magic circle that would aid my brewing—but in order to actually use it, I needed to transfer the design onto paper.

I checked the magic circle for any errors—I already had it memorized, but better safe than sorry—then held down my sheet of paper with my left thumb and index finger. Then, after deciding how big I wanted to make my copies, I morphed my schtappe into a pen and took a slow breath. My every line would need to be beautiful and precise.

My focus entirely on the pen, I drew several circles of various sizes, one after another. My movements were quick but delicate.

“Hah. I seem to be on a roll today.”

My concentration was perfect, and my pen moved with tremendous accuracy. It was probably because I was in such good health at the moment. My mana flowed smoothly and the lines I drew were of equal thickness, making my circle even more seemly than expected.

I set down my pen and paused to appreciate my work—but not

for long enough that my focus would wane. After rotating my wrist a few times and rolling my shoulder to loosen up, I got to work drawing the sigils next.

All of a sudden, a flapping noise announced the arrival of an ordonnanz. This wasn't the best time, considering that my arm was occupied and could not serve as a perch. I completed the sigil that I was working on, tapped the desk to make the little nuisance land, then resumed my drawing.

"Professor Hirschur," the bird said, "we need you to unlock the Ehrenfest Dormitory." It was a message from one of the knights working in the dormitory's teleportation hall.

"I will soon," I replied, not even looking up from my magic circle. "Wait for now." I was preoccupied at the moment, so I would send the ordonnanz back later.

Aah. The Archduke Conference arrived in the blink of an eye.

It was about now that attendants would start arriving from the castle to begin preparing the dormitory. I was fortunate enough not to be teaching any remedial lessons this year, so I'd paid almost no attention to the changing of the seasons, but this meant that spring was almost over.

Ah, how wonderful it has been not having to tutor Angelica. Words cannot describe how great it feels to be so immersed in my research.

But alas, I soon received *another* ordonnanz: "Professor Hirschur, where are you? We request that the dormitory be unlocked."

Truly a foolish question; I was obviously in my laboratory in the scholar building. And surely they understood that my lack of a response meant I was brewing—or could they not even piece together that much?

"Good grief..." I sighed, again ignoring the ordonnanz to focus on my drawing. "It seems to me that the knights stationed in the teleportation hall need more training."

Yes, it was my duty as a dormitory supervisor to lock and unlock the dormitory and tea party room, but my intervention was not necessary for the servants to prepare chefs or the attendants to clean the room for the archducal couple. My mana was in top form right now, and I intended to finish the magic circle and complete my brewing while that remained true.

I gazed upon my magic circle with a contented sigh, impressed

with my accomplishment—only for yet another ordonnanz to arrive.

“This is Norbert. Hirschur, I ask that you unlock the dormitory and tea party room without further delay.”

So, the castle’s head attendant had decided to join the tomfoolery. One could easily imagine his furious countenance.

I was going to start brewing right away... but I sense that making them wait any longer will only cause me more trouble.

“Though it pains me to admit it, this is the bare minimum I must do as a dormitory supervisor. I suppose I shall accept.”

After heaving a very drawn-out sigh, I stood up. Then, after one last regretful glance at my magic circle, I went into my laboratory’s hidden room and acquired my key ring.

I shall unlock the doors to the central building and the tea party room, and that is all, I told myself. It won’t be long before I’m back in my laboratory and immersed in research.

A meeting with Norbert would surely lead to a bothersome lecture of sorts, so I was prepared to leave the moment my work was done. I inserted my key into the door the moment I arrived at the dormitory and started pouring my mana into it—and no sooner had the door unlocked than it opened from the other side.

“Pray tell, Hirschur—where were your responses to our ordonnanzes?” Norbert asked, wearing a smile that did not reach his eyes in the least. He was dressed in the sharp attire of an archduke’s head attendant, and his hair, which was more gray than brown these days, was smartly slicked back with gel.

I certainly hadn’t expected Norbert to be listening for my arrival, but I managed to hide my surprise behind a smile. “Oh my. Good day to you, Uncle. If you will excuse me, I must go unlock the tea party room as well.”

I tried to close the door again and make my escape, but he stopped me in my tracks. “I am glad to see you in such good health this year, but can you do nothing about that outfit of yours? You are a professor of the Royal Academy—and a noblewoman, above all else.”

I knew this would happen, which is precisely why I was trying to avoid him.

A small voice in my head told me that I could have sidestepped this mess by responding to that knight’s first ordonnanz... but I

silenced it at once.

“Ah, dear me,” I said. “Should my appearance come as any surprise when I was so abruptly dragged away from my research? I put down my very important work because someone made this seem urgent—and I will continue that work immediately upon returning to my laboratory.” Changing clothes would have been a waste of time, since I would have needed to change back to continue brewing.

Norbert’s brow furrowed a little, and his purple eyes narrowed in a glare. “Just how much time do you believe has passed since that first *ordonnanz* was sent? You had more than enough time to make yourself presentable, did you not?”

“Unfortunately, I spent all of that time trying to find an appropriate stopping point in my work. If you require me to dress up then I would ask that you arrange a formal meeting instead of summoning me by *ordonnanz* at such short notice. I would be more than willing to accommodate your wishes then.”

No matter how deeply I was absorbed in my work, I was fully capable of changing my clothes if given three or four days’ notice. After all, my attendant would outright forbid me from doing research on the day I was needed.

“If you do not wish to see me in these clothes, dear uncle, then allow me to lock the door again so that we might arrange a meeting. I am sure we can arrange for my return before the archducal family arrives.”

I was ready to close the door—and put an end to the lecture—but Norbert moved to stop me. “Just go and unlock the tea party room. Oh, and Hirschur... dormitory supervisors are supposed to live in their respective dormitory. Is it not about time that you return?”

How painfully ironic. It was at Norbert’s request that I moved to the laboratory in the first place—he had told me that Lady Veronica’s mood soured each time she saw me in the dormitory during the Archduke Conference. Now, here he was, demanding that I come back.

I cocked my head to one side and smiled provocatively. “My apologies, dear uncle. I have lived away from the dormitory for so long that I do not know *how* to return.”

Norbert paused for a moment and then said, “Lord Sylvester’s children will be enrolled in the Royal Academy next winter. We

would like the dormitory to have its supervisor back before then.”

“Lord Sylvester’s children...?”

If my memory served me right, Lord Sylvester’s first son had been raised by Lady Veronica herself and was set to become the next archduke. My cheek twitched; the troubles we had all faced during Lord Sylvester’s time at the Royal Academy were sure to resurface.

“Dear uncle,” I said, “if this is not a request from Aub Ehrenfest himself, then I must decline even you. Now, I must go unlock the tea party room.”

And with that, I took my leave. A small part of me thought I heard someone say, “Our discussion is not yet over,” but I elected to believe it was my imagination.

If my return to the dormitory really is important, he’ll surely come after me.

At a leisurely pace, I made my way to the tea party room. Ehrenfest’s door was number fourteen.

Though we may end up climbing a rank this year.

The duchy’s younger students were obtaining higher grades than expected, to the point that some of the other professors had even started to comment on their achievements. One could assume they were working their hardest in hope of being chosen to serve the archduke candidates coming to the Royal Academy.

I unlocked the door and, lo and behold, there was Norbert. “Send word when the Archduke Conference is over,” I said to him, turning to leave. “I will come and lock any doors you wish.”

“Hirschur, this does not conclude your duties for this year’s Archduke Conference. There are other things I must ask you to do as Ehrenfest’s dormitory supervisor.”

I paused. It was clear from his decision to come here that this conversation really was important... but to my knowledge, there was nothing else for me to do.

“And what might those be?” I asked.

“We need special accommodations to be made for Lady Rozemyne, one of the enrolling archduke candidates. This box here contains a letter from Aub Ehrenfest and documents from her primary doctor. Take them. I think you will find them necessary.”

Lady Rozemyne? The fabled saint?

Several years ago, some amused professors had consulted me about her. “Hartmut continues to mention a *saint* being baptized in

Ehrenfest,” one had said. Another had then asked me to comment on gossip of “a new daughter loved dearly by the gods.” Of course, the saint rumors were too foolish for anyone to actually believe—but nobody could deny that she had been baptized as Lord Karstedt and Lady Elvira’s daughter before being adopted by the archduke. This meant she was also Cornelius’s little sister.

I’m impressed that a girl in her position was adopted at all; it seems infinitely unlikely that Lady Veronica would ever give her permission. Hm... Perhaps she is Lord Sylvester’s newest sacrifice so that he can remain aub.

I was well aware of my bias against Lord Sylvester, but I simply could not bring myself to like him. There had been a time when Ferdinand and I hoped that his becoming archduke would curtail Lady Veronica’s tyranny and bring change to Ehrenfest—but, in the end, everything had stayed the same.

I returned to my laboratory, the box Norbert had given me in my arms. Special accommodations were given to students who, for one reason or another, could not enter the Royal Academy during their tenth winter or graduate during their fifteenth. They had previously been given out after the civil war, to the flood of apprentice blue priests and shrine maidens who entered the temple, but that period was over. Under what circumstances was an *archduke candidate* now requiring them?

“A year and a half ago, while everyone was gathered in the castle for winter socializing, she was attacked by a group of Ehrenfest nobles. She has been in a jureve ever since.”

I’d decided to read Aub Ehrenfest’s letter first, and immediately my head started to spin. Just how far had Ehrenfest fallen for its own nobles to have attacked the archducal family?

Hmm... Has Lord Sylvester finally begun to act like a proper archduke, exacerbating the conflict with Lady Veronica?

I shook my head to dispel the idea. Allowing hope to lead me astray would only make the inevitable disappointment hurt all the more.

Still... Is a year and a half not far too long? I wondered. One normally only spent between three and ten days in a jureve.

“Ah, yes... Of course,” I muttered as I started piecing things together. Lady Rozemyne was but a child and had not yet enrolled at the Royal Academy. She wouldn’t have her own jureve and

would thus be relying on that of a parent or an unmarried sibling—thereby explaining the dissonance.

Alongside the letter from Lord Sylvester was one from his first wife, Lady Florencia. I read it as well.

“I apologize, Professor Hirschur. I am aware that special accommodations are no longer being provided for temple-raised apprentices and that preparing them again will not be easy. Know that your work is for a good cause, though. Rozemyne is such a precious girl, and it is because of her that my children are safe. I pray that you will do everything in your power to help maintain her future as a noble.”

Lady Charlotte, the archduke’s biological daughter, had apparently been kidnapped, and Lady Rozemyne had been gravely wounded in the process of saving her. That came as no surprise; branch families and adopted children were told ad nauseam to prioritize the first wife’s children above all else.

How irritating... But that will not stop me from preparing these special accommodations.

“Incidentally, I wonder whether these documents are in proper form.”

Lord Sylvester had put them together, and considering how shoddy his work often turned out to be, they were probably missing all sorts of crucial information. I gazed at the box dubiously, then took out the documents. Lady Rozemyne’s condition was written in small, precise letters.

“Is this... Ferdinand’s handwriting? He, of all people, is acting as Lady Rozemyne’s primary doctor?”

Doctor or not, a position in the castle meant his situation had improved from his days spent in the temple. Or perhaps Lady Rozemyne was being so severely abused as an adopted daughter that she had not been permitted a doctor, forcing Ferdinand to take the role. I sighed; it was impossible to know from these documents alone, and my disciple hadn’t sent me a single update on his situation.

“These documents are so detailed; I would have been able to make a petition with only half as many. But if he knew these were going to reach me, he could have at least slipped in a letter to let me know how he’s doing. Good grief...”

Considering how harshly Lady Veronica had treated Ferdinand when he was a student, it was hard to imagine her treating Lady Elvira’s daughter—adopted or otherwise—with any semblance of

warmth. I envisioned my disciple standing at the forefront to protect this young girl... and instinctively, I grimaced.

Special accommodations needed to be petitioned for during the Archduke Conference, and they required the direct approval of the royal family. I contacted the other professors and summoned them to an emergency meeting in the central building. The room we were using had been cleaned in preparation for the upcoming conference, so it was much nicer than usual.

Gundolf was the first to speak. "I must admit, Hirschur, I never would have expected you to gather us together like this. With the Archduke Conference around the corner, I assumed you were immersed in research."

"Yes, that is how I would rather be spending my time, instead of doing whatever task has been forced upon me. But I must do the bare minimum as a professor... and this development is something I cannot overlook."

The other supervisors were far busier than I. They were all in the midst of preparing their dormitories, making sure everything was ready for their duchies' visitors.

Gundolf chuckled. "I do not know what happened, but you certainly exude the *aura* of a genuine professor."

"Oh my. Do I not always?"

I showed the professors the documents from Ehrenfest and a copied-out portion of the archduke's letter. "Lady Rozemyne, the intended recipient of these special accommodations, is not a mere blue priest or shrine maiden from the temple. She is the adoptive daughter of Aub Ehrenfest himself."

"What must have happened for a member of the archducal family to require such accommodations?" Primevere asked, blinking at me curiously. These really were unthinkable circumstances; members of the archducal family were given retainers at a young age and overseen by guard knights at all times.

"One of the duchy's own nobles attacked its castle, and she was gravely wounded while protecting the archduke's daughter by blood. As she has not yet enrolled as a student, she does not have a jureve. It is mentioned here that she had to rely on one given to her by a family member—but she has been asleep for a year and a half now, so its affinity to her mana must not be very high."

"Is that really enough to explain her unusually long sleep?"

Rauffen asked. "There must be something else."

I could see his point. It wasn't particularly uncommon for children to use a family member's jureve, and when they did, rarely were they rendered unconscious for so long. Furthermore, Lady Rozemyne had male siblings whose mana had never been influenced through marriage or what have you. If she had received one of their jureves, why had it been so incompatible?

"According to these documents from her primary doctor in Ehrenfest, there are several contributing factors. As she was attacked in the castle, we can assume that everyone was in quite a panic, no? Time was of the essence, which is why she had to accept the jureve of her nearest brother, who was guarding the archducal family at the time. Unfortunately, said brother has a history of marriage—and on top of that, Lady Rozemyne's birth and baptismal mothers are not one and the same. That is why her affinity to the jureve is so low."

"But why use his jureve to begin with? They should have sought her father's and... Ah." Rauffen paused, having at last understood. "She is adopted, so her parents' jureves would not be in the castle."

The archduke's biological children would have had easy access to their parents' jureves, but not Lady Rozemyne. There had been no guarantee that she would survive the journey to her estate, which was why they had needed to act quickly. A jureve was needed to keep her from the distant heights, but her once married elder brother was the only available donor. It was a tough decision made under tremendously stressful circumstances.

"Lady Rozemyne's father, Lord Karstedt, serves as Ehrenfest's knight commander. Thus, when it came to light that members of the archducal family had been attacked in the castle, he sprang into action. It also took him some time to retrieve his jureve from his hidden room and, as his potion was given to Lady Rozemyne immediately after she had received one from her brother, there was a brief period when her body rejected it entirely."

Sighs filled the meeting room. These decisions made under stress had saved Lady Rozemyne's life—but at the same time, she was missing out on such an integral period of growth.

"Still, that was all a year and a half ago," Fraularm said. "Is it not likely that her mana clumps will fail to dissolve and she will ascend to the distant heights?"

I gave a curt nod. "It is. Her recovery is laggard at best, and there are no signs that she will wake up. But she is still alive. We must not allow her future to be snuffed out when she was poisoned while protecting the archduke's daughter. That is why I need your help. Is it not our duty as professors to support our students, old and new?"

After hearing my honest appeal, the other professors all agreed to the special accommodations and signed their names on a board to prove it. Now, all that remained was for Lord Sylvester to obtain the royal family's permission during the Archduke Conference.

Well, I came all this way to the central building... Might as well stop by the dormitory and deliver the board. Then, my duty will at last be complete.

Once our meeting concluded, I sent an ordonnanz to the Ehrenfest Dormitory to inform them I was coming. Norbert was waiting in the entrance hall when I arrived.

"Professor Hirschur," he said, "I am told you secured the Royal Academy's approval. I thank you." To my surprise, he was welcoming me not as a chiding uncle but as the castle's head attendant. I would respond to him accordingly.

"Here is the board you need, Norbert. Sovereign scholars may begin to question the circumstances behind the attack on Lady Rozemyne. Ehrenfest must be prepared to answer them alone."

It had been my duty to obtain the permission of the other Royal Academy professors, but convincing the king rightly fell to the archduke.

Sometime later, I received another ordonnanz: the royal family had agreed to our request during the Archduke Conference, and Aub Ehrenfest was inviting me to a celebratory meal. I swiftly refused—nothing good would come of eating with the archduke—and returned to my brewing.

Summer came and went as I continued my research, and autumn began. These were quiet seasons in the Royal Academy, so most professors returned to their home duchy or the Sovereignty—but it was also when gathering research materials became much easier. Herbs grew in abundance and feyplants bore fruit, so visiting the Academy's gardens proved very enjoyable.

As the end of autumn approached, the other professors started

to return. Things were getting busier as servants began preparing for the new academic term, and it was then that an ordonnanz arrived for me. I was rarely ever contacted at this time of year, so it was an unusual development. What might have happened?

“This is the Ehrenfest Dormitory,” said one of the knights stationed in the teleportation hall. “Professor Hirschur, a letter has arrived for you. We ask that you come retrieve it before the term begins.”

To honor their request, I went and collected the letter after completing my brewing.

“Oh? This is from Lord Ferdinand.”

I opened the letter. At the very beginning was an announcement that Lady Rozemyne had woken up. She would be attending the Royal Academy normally and no longer required any special accommodations. For the sake of her future, having her attend alongside everyone else was the best move—assuming there was time to prepare.

But as I read on, I was completely taken aback.

“Wait a moment. Why was none of this mentioned in the other letters?!”

They had explained that Lady Rozemyne wasn’t Lady Elvira’s biological daughter, but there hadn’t been so much as a mention that she was raised in the temple. Not to mention, her noble education was apparently lacking due to her two-year slumber.

Lady Rozemyne had more mana than the average archduke candidate—as one would expect of a child adopted into the archducal family—but sleeping in a jureve had made her flow somewhat unstable. According to the letter, she needed supportive magic tools just to move, and she was having trouble controlling her mana as well.

In short, Ferdinand wanted me to watch Lady Rozemyne carefully during her practical lessons—though he specified that she would have no problems at all with her written ones. He wrote at length and in detail about what he had taught her.

“Rozemyne has absurd and fascinating thought patterns, so she will surely be of use to your research. She is in your care,” I said, reading the letter aloud. “You cannot be serious, Ferdinand. If you had time to write so extensively about Lady Rozemyne, could you not have added at least a sentence about yourself...?”

Still, this letter had been written with far more enthusiasm than

the one I'd received months ago. I recalled my disciple's habit of growing more talkative when it came to research that interested him, and a smile arose on my lips.

For him to have written this, he must be doing better than when he feared that Lady Veronica would soon succeed at killing him.

"Still, this letter focuses entirely on Lady Rozemyne. How rare it is for Ferdinand, of all people, to be this concerned about another. A fascinating archduke candidate with bizarre and creative ideas... I wonder what she will do during her time here?"

Despite having stressed that Lady Rozemyne was educated enough to breeze through her written lessons, Ferdinand went on to provide a long and very detailed list of things to be aware of when teaching her and the like. He clearly saw her as his disciple and was very fond of her despite all the trouble she caused him.

I thought back to the days when Ferdinand was a student. He had secured high grades, but there had been no end to his shenanigans. "I wonder, has he finally learned the struggles of being a mentor?" I cackled, recalling the many incidents he had caused and all that he had achieved.

Winter was upon us, and so was Lady Rozemyne's enrollment at the Royal Academy. She would presumably tell me more about Ferdinand than I could ever discern from his letters. At that thought, I really started to look forward to meeting my disciple's disciple.



Roderick — She Who Saved My Heart

Description: A sales bonus for Part 4 Volume 2. During a meeting in the Royal Academy, the mednoble Roderick faces another day of abuse from the other members of the former Veronica faction.

Author's Note: Many of you wanted to know more about the nobles of the former Veronica faction living in the Ehrenfest Dormitory—so they're exactly whom this story focuses on!

"I was under the impression that Viscount Joisontak went rogue and acted alone, but to think the soldiers who attacked the archducal family belonged to an Ahrensbach noble..."

We children of the former Veronica faction, numbering a dozen or so in total, were gathered in a meeting room. The air was heavy but also laced with understanding. Lady Rozemyne had explained the circumstances to us so that we knew why the archducal family intended to distance themselves from Ahrensbach.

"Roderick, good on you for asking. Knowing why the aub is on guard against Ahrensbach puts us in a much better position to plan ahead," Lord Matthias, a third-year apprentice knight, said to me with a smile.

It hadn't been easy speaking in front of everyone in the dining hall, especially when Lord Wilfried thought so poorly of me, but nobody had wanted to take my place. I had needed to ask no matter how scary it was. Thankfully, everyone had accepted Lady Rozemyne's answer, meaning my duty was now complete.

I relaxed my shoulders while looking around the meeting room. My intentions were to keep my head down and wait for the discussion to end.

Two years ago, during the hunting tournament, my father had instructed me to play with Lord Wilfried. Naturally, I did as he asked... but it was because of my actions that Lord Wilfried ended up committing a grave crime. My faction had ostracized me ever since, claiming that I betrayed our shining ray of hope. Those who

had once been my friends now looked at me with cold, scornful eyes.

Maybe this will make my life in the faction easier...

Everyone was focused on what the former Veronica faction should do next, but I was thinking only about myself.

Lord Matthias continued, "I was sure that our faction would regain some power—that time would slowly bury Ahrensbach's involvement in Lady Veronica's treachery. But if Ahrensbach was also involved in this attack, the archducal family will never lower their guard. Things are not looking good for us."

Most of the people here had connections with Ahrensbach nobles, and understandably so—our faction had started out as the children and grandchildren of the retainers Lady Gabriele brought with her from Ahrensbach when she married into Ehrenfest. Lady Veronica had told us to continue strengthening our bonds with Ahrensbach, and the archduke's elder sister, Lady Georgine, was even married to the aub there.

"Guess it's no surprise that my older brother Freuden's engagement to an Ahrensbach girl was rejected," added Lord Laurenz, a second-year, while shaking his head of dark-green hair. "Pretty rare for an archduke to refuse a union that both fathers support, right? I was real curious about what was going on, but there's one mystery solved."

The next contribution came from Lady Patricia. "During a tea party I attended before coming here, it was mentioned that Lord Lamprecht, who serves Lord Wilfried as a guard knight, also had his engagement proposal refused. The explanation was originally that he lives in the Noble's Quarter, but if a giebe had theirs rejected as well..." She cast her eyes down. "Mine will certainly be refused too."

Lady Patricia was a fifth-year with a lover in Ahrensbach. Apparently, she was even taking action to secure their engagement. I was still a first-year, so all this talk of marriage didn't mean much to me, but a stir spread through those who hadn't known the aub was refusing certain engagements. Ever since Lady Georgine's visit, the adults of our faction had instructed us to form closer bonds with Ahrensbach so that we could suppress the Leisengangs and reclaim our former power.

Those who already have partners in Ahrensbach sure have it rough. I won't ever have to worry about that, though.

I wasn't my family's successor, and my mother was a second wife. Perhaps I would have been able to find a partner by serving Lord Wilfried, but after the Ivory Tower incident, that was never going to happen. Besides, nobody would want to marry a noble on bad terms with their archducal family.

Father ordered me to take Lord Wilfried to the Ivory Tower. Then, when he found out that going there is a crime, he started beating me. I would never be given permission to marry and start a branch family.

"I understand why the aub is on guard against Ahrensbach," Lord Laurenz said, "but how can we cut ties with a duchy we share a border with? Treating their merchants with suspicion will also harm Ehrenfest's economy. What does he expect giebess to do?" His father was Viscount Wiltord, the giebess of a province bordering Ahrensbach, so his concerns were understandable. There were orders in place to keep any foreign nobles out of our Noble's Quarter, and he was worried that the rule might spread to the entire duchy.

"Gerlach also shares a border with Ahrensbach, and we get along very well with their nobles," Lord Matthias added. "I don't know the details, but it turns out that my father was put under suspicion too." He gave a troubled smile. "I suppose he *did* associate with Viscount Joisontak..."

These two sons of giebess were only a couple years older than me at most, but they were considering our situation from so many more angles than I was. As someone who lived in the Noble's Quarter, it hadn't even occurred to me that the provinces bordering Ahrensbach would struggle.

"Ngh... Lady Veronica never would have let this happen," grumbled Lord Rubert, a sixth-year. "If only we could have saved her when we had the chance." He looked daggers at me, and my entire body froze. Gone were the high spirits that Lady Rozemyne had put me in.

Two years had passed since that detestable hunting tournament and, while I was accustomed to the abuse, it still made me feel miserable. I remembered all too clearly the events of that fateful day when my life was turned on its head. My friends and I were called over by our fathers, whereupon they told us to invite Lord Wilfried to play and take him to the Ivory Tower where Lady Veronica was staying. They warned us not to go inside, though. Only members of the archducal family could open the door.

I'd enjoyed playing with my friends so, so much. More than anything. Only through the winter playroom had I managed to connect with other boys; before then, I'd only ever played with the daughters of my mother's friends. On top of that, my family's circumstances had always made it hard for me to visit people.

And so we searched the forest for the Ivory Tower, doing exactly as we were instructed. Eventually, we found it—and, as our fathers had told us, Lord Wilfried was able to open the door. We thought nothing of it when he went inside; we all just stood around waiting for him to return, speculating about what was in there and wishing that we could join him.

After a while, Lord Wilfried came back outside. He told us that his grandmother had sworn him to secrecy and refused to elaborate, no matter how much we wanted him to. We even asked whether he wanted to be alone to think about whatever was bothering him, but he shook his head and replied that he didn't get many chances to play with us.

We had done what our fathers had asked of us, so we went back to having fun.

Sometime after the hunting tournament came the start of winter socializing. Only then did we learn that Lord Wilfried was no longer guaranteed to become the next aub; he had been demoted for his crime of entering the Ivory Tower, and the nobles who had informed him of its location were given small but meaningful punishments. Back then, I hadn't understood what the archduke was saying—I'd merely stared at him in confusion. But at that very moment, my days of peace had come to an unfortunate end.

That same night, the archducal family was attacked.

When I saw Lord Wilfried in the winter playroom the next day, he gave me the most reproachful glare. The other children who had played with us during the tournament had pinned the blame on me, claiming that *I* had suggested we go to the Ivory Tower. Things were even worse at home; my father struck me without restraint, telling me that my failure had doomed their plan.

Out of nowhere, my whole world had come crashing down. I was the subject of scorn, belittled and attacked at every turn. It was so unfair that I didn't even know what to say. In fact, there was nothing I *could* say. Because of my low status, my only choice was to accept the abuse.

Lord Wilfried was defended as a matter of course. "How

unfortunate that he lost his claim to the archducal seat,” people would say. “He did not know that entering the Ivory Tower is a crime.” Meanwhile, I was condemned under the axiom that ignorance of the law is no excuse—that my ignorance was a crime in itself.

Despite his punishment, Lord Wilfried continued to live as a normal member of the archducal family. He was respected by all and treated no differently from Lady Charlotte. At the very least, it didn’t seem like his own faction made him feel eternally unsafe. It didn’t seem like he was being beaten by his father and then forced to drink rejuvenation potions until the bruises faded.

We were both victims of ignorance, but I’m treated so much worse. Status sure is everything.

“Quit it, Rubert,” came an unexpected voice. “Your attitude is so pathetic that it pains me just to look at you. That incident with the Ivory Tower happened because Lord Wilfried and his former retainers didn’t know what was forbidden.”

I’d been staring down at my feet and waiting for the abuse to end, but I was so surprised that I looked up again. There was Lord Janrik, Lord Matthias’s older brother, waving away Lord Rubert with a look of disgust.

Lord Rubert fell silent, though he continued to fix me with a hateful glare. The others around him looked just as sickened by my being here.

“Lord Janrik is right,” Lord Laurenz said. “Roderick has also made it clear that he was only doing as his father instructed. Or did you all forget?”

Lord Matthias nodded along in agreement. “Life at the Royal Academy has improved for us ever since Lady Rozemyne woke up and started discouraging faction disputes in the dormitory. Rather than being forever stuck in the past, we need to think about our future.”

Last year and the year before, the Leisegangs had started throwing their weight around in the Ehrenfest Dormitory, resulting in some very harsh treatment for those of the former Veronica faction. This was my first year at the Royal Academy, so I didn’t have any firsthand experience of those days, but I suspected that tensions in the winter playroom were to blame.

“Things might have improved, but they were even better when I first enrolled,” Lord Rubert snapped. “I could speak with the

Leisegangs as equals instead of constantly needing to gauge their mood. Hah... If only Lady Veronica were here.”

Lord Rubert’s reminiscing always made me wish I’d been born a few years earlier. As he so often said, our lives would have been much easier if Lady Veronica had never been imprisoned.

“Don’t rule out Lady Georgine,” Lord Janrik said. “She’s going to be visiting more often, and with Ahrensbach’s support under his belt, it shouldn’t be hard for Lord Wilfried to make a comeback and become the next aub. He even seems to be on good terms with Lady Detlinde.” He turned to address the room. “Together, Lady Georgine and Lord Wilfried will strengthen our connection to Ahrensbach—a connection that Lady Gabriele and Lady Veronica worked so hard to create.”

His words carried a certain gravitas, maybe because he was a sixth-year and had seen the dormitory change so many times. Lord Rubert seemed convinced too.

“Right. From what I heard, Lord Wilfried *wants* to socialize with Lady Georgine. We just need to be patient. Lady Veronica will surely be pardoned and freed from the Ivory Tower.”

“I doubt that,” Lord Janrik replied with a shrug. “Lady Veronica committed a crime so grave that not even the aub—*her son*—could protect her any longer. I can’t imagine what it would take to get her out.” He didn’t seem at all convinced that Lady Veronica would return, whereas Lord Rubert still considered her our faction’s greatest hope.

“Ah, but her hands are clean! Lord Ferdinand masterminded it all in an act of revenge. He went to the temple and waited for everyone to lower their guards. That’s why Father advised Aub Ehrenfest not to send him to the temple and to instead follow Lady Veronica’s advice by—”

“Rubert, you would be wise not to criticize the aub,” Lord Janrik said.

Rubert looked around the room, then sighed. “I share your opinion that what happened was part of a scheme, but I do not doubt that Lady Veronica committed the crime she was charged with. I am merely saying that Lord Wilfried, when he becomes aub, will overturn her punishment as a relic of the past.”

“Ah, now *that* is likely. Lord Wilfried was raised by Lady Veronica, and he surely wouldn’t leave his own grandmother to rot.”

Those of our faction agreed with Rubert—and, in their desperation, they immediately expounded on the power of blood relations and the gratitude a person must feel toward whoever raised them. They were useless ideals, I thought as I stroked my cheek, still able to feel my father's blows. I would cast aside blood ties and filial piety in a heartbeat.

Not to mention, Lady Rozemyne is clearly better suited to become the next aub.

There had been a major contrast between the first and second years of the winter playroom. Lady Rozemyne had sat at a distance and carefully overseen things, as opposed to Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte who had simply started playing like all the other children. She was just in a league of her own.

“Do you really think so?” Lord Matthias asked. “Do you truly believe Lord Wilfried is capable of making a comeback?”

“Matthias,” Lord Janrik snapped, but his brother still continued in a calm and quiet voice.

“Lord Wilfried may be scoring excellent grades, but I cannot see him making a grand return when he has a criminal record. There are also the obvious comparisons to Lady Rozemyne, considering that both are the same age. Even to someone of another faction, her superiority is more than clear.”

The excitement started to wane once again. I agreed with Lord Matthias entirely—and everyone in their third year or below who had experienced Lady Rozemyne's winter playroom surely did too.

Lord Janrik shook his head in bemusement. “I'll accept that Lady Rozemyne is extraordinary, but aren't you showing her a little too much favoritism? You need more than just talent and skill to become an aub. No matter how great she may be, no matter how much the Leisegangs support her, she is not a child of Lady Florencia, whom the aub loves above all else. She is also female. It is highly unlikely she would be selected as the next aub.”

“But, Brother—”

“Aub Ehrenfest cannot cut off our faction entirely—and, considering the current balance of power, he cannot disregard Lord Wilfried either. *That* is why Lord Wilfried will stage a comeback. Father and I expect he will marry Lady Rozemyne to silence the Leisegangs.”

Lord Janrik's prediction seemed very reasonable to me, but was the aub truly unable to sever ties with the former Veronica faction?

I wanted to believe so, but with how the Leisegang nobles were now taking the lead, I really had my doubts.

“Do you have proof that the aub will not cut us off, Lord Janrik?”

“First, there are many of our faction still among his retainers. Second, even the Leisegangs have heavily restricted access to Lady Rozemyne. Third, abandoning us entirely would cripple his administration,” he replied, counting off the reasons on his fingers. “He would only be creating needless ire by replacing the innocent.”

I ended up nodding along. Everything that Lord Janrik said made sense.

“Even when Lady Veronica held power, the aub put Leisegang nobles among Lady Florencia’s retainers and ensured that each faction had equal representation in the archducal family’s service. In the past, this frustrated me, but now it makes me certain that the former Veronica faction will not be pushed aside. Well, unless something truly damning happens.”

So, as our meeting concluded, we all agreed there was no reason to be pessimistic about the future. As mere children bound to our parents’ faction, we didn’t need to come to any hard conclusions; we just wanted somewhere in this closed-off dormitory we could spend our time in peace.

The next day, Lady Rozemyne began visiting the library, which meant we first-years could start going too. This wasn’t part of an official rule—under normal circumstances, the library was freely accessible to anyone who was registered—but none of us had dared step foot in that building while Lady Rozemyne was being denied access.

Lady Rozemyne quickly developed a daily routine. She would borrow a book with a satisfied smile and return to the dormitory right before sixth bell. Then, after dinner, she would retire to her room—presumably to read. She had much less of a presence in the common room as a result, which made Lord Wilfried and his retainers far more dominant. They kept a close eye on any student in the former Veronica faction, fearing that we would attempt some horrible act again.

In just a few days, the common room became an unbearable place for me to stay. I needed somewhere I could feel at ease from when Lady Rozemyne went to the library until afternoon practical

lessons.

“But where can I run and hide...?” I murmured one day while bathing. Mednobles generally lived in large, shared rooms rather than our own personal ones. We also had to save our mana for classes, which meant we didn’t have enough leeway to create our own hidden rooms. Thus, the only places I could escape the eyes of the other students were in bed and the bathroom.

“You wish for somewhere to hide?” asked Kashmir, my attendant. He gave me a pitying look, probably because of all the time we’d spent in peace here at the dormitory. “How about the library? None would cause a fuss with Lady Rozemyne around. Plus, it would give you an excellent chance to transcribe books, which is crest-certified work. I cannot think of a better place to lay low.”

Lady Rozemyne forbade faction politics, saying it could wait until we returned to Ehrenfest, and praised everyone equally no matter their status. It was true that nobody would cause a fuss in her presence. On top of that, earning money would be an exceptionally smart move for me, considering my father’s lack of support. I would also be able to use those funds to hire servants, which I was sure Kashmir would appreciate.

“But Kashmir... her retainers would oppose my being there, wouldn’t they? Those serving Lord Wilfried treat me more harshly than Lord Wilfried himself.”

“Lady Rozemyne personally requested these transcriptions. As long as you do not approach her and antagonize her retainers, you should be fine.”

So, at Kashmir’s advice, I started going to the library. I set out as soon as I saw Lady Rozemyne’s group getting ready to leave and soon arrived at the reading room—but before I could secure myself a carrel, the library’s shumils said, “Milady is here” and hopped away. As it turned out, they welcomed Lady Rozemyne personally.

As soon as Lady Rozemyne entered the reading room, she went up to the second floor. She probably had a book in mind already. Meanwhile, I stood around absentmindedly, waiting for the shumils to return.

“Oh, Lord Roderick. Are you here to transcribe books too?” asked Philine, a laynoble. I noticed that she was on her way to a carrel with writing utensils in hand. She never seemed awkward or

distant when she spoke to me, maybe because we had been comrades-in-arms in our battles to pass our history and geography exams the first time around.

“I was thinking of transcribing a book for Lady Rozemyne,” I replied. “Do you have any idea what she might want?”

“Yes, I have a list right here. I’m about to start transcribing *this* book...” She pointed at one of the titles on her list. Then, she tapped a finger against a second and continued, “So perhaps you could transcribe *this* one.”

From there, Philine called over the shumils, then requested the two books she had pointed out and two carrels. She took care of everything but seemed a little awkward while doing so, probably because she wasn’t used to recommending titles to others.

As I was watching Philine’s preparations, I suddenly felt like I was being watched. I turned around and immediately spotted Lord Hartmut staring at us from a short distance away. The cold, scrutinizing look in his orange eyes made me freeze up all at once.



“Lord Roderick, your carrel is rea...” Philine trailed off. “Is something wrong?”

“Lord Hartmut seems to be glaring at me. Should I be worried?”

“Oh, Hartmut is simply watching to make sure I carried out his instructions without issue.” A smile spread across her lips. “I was truly anxious when I first became a retainer, but everyone in Lady Rozemyne’s service is so kind, which came as such a relief.”

I wanted to say, “That’s great,” but the words caught in my throat. Philine was getting to be Lady Rozemyne’s retainer *and* she was in a position where she could address Lord Hartmut without a title. I couldn’t help but feel annoyed.

Why does a laynoble get to be so happy?!

I knew that it was unreasonable of me to lash out, but I couldn’t help it; all of my envy kept bubbling to the surface. The best I could do was grit my teeth and try to focus my mind.

“Philine,” came a voice so unexpected that it made me jump. Lord Hartmut had at some point approached us. “You said the lines right, but you still seemed a bit awkward about going through the process. Show any signs of weakness to students from other duchies and they’ll look down on you. You need more practice.”

I thanked Philine for the book and paper, then hurried into my carrel and locked it behind me. I set down my ink and paper, then took a seat and started thumbing through the book that was chosen for me. It contained scenes with knights in combat—and the moment I saw them, a wave of emotion swept through me. I couldn’t help but think of the story I’d given to Lady Rozemyne.

Philine and I both told stories that were made into books, but only she was chosen... Gah, how come she’s so much luckier than me?!

I gritted my teeth more fiercely and glared at the book, trying to hold back my tears. This was a carrel in the library, not a hidden room.

If only I were part of another faction... Had I been born to different parents, I might have been where Philine is now.

I was so jealous because I wanted Lady Rozemyne to accept me. I’d never been able to afford karuta and playing cards, and seeing the other kids’ parents buying them had always felt so unfair. But then, three years ago, after our debuts at the end of winter, Lady Rozemyne had so graciously offered to lend them to those of us

who couldn't afford them. In return, we had only needed to give her a story.

I'd ended up choosing a tale my mother had told me about a courageous knight... but the more I tried to repeat it, the more I confused myself. Failure wasn't an option, so I was trying my absolute best, but it felt like the details were all being scrubbed from my mind with purification magic. And the more I panicked, the more my mind went blank. Still, I saw my story through to the end. It was fragmented and nonsensical, but Lady Rozemyne listened to the entire thing with a smile and wrote down my every word.

At the time, I'd simply been glad to have received some playing cards—but everything changed just a year later. Lady Rozemyne was attacked and ended up in a long slumber, and everyone suddenly started to see me as their enemy. It was around then that the Plantin Company held another book sale, and among their stock was something I'd never expected—a glimmer of light in my otherwise pitch-dark world:

A collection of the very same stories we'd told in the winter playroom.

I couldn't even describe how much that had moved me. Some even read my story and smiled, saying it was really entertaining. Father had called me useless and an unnecessary part of the family... but now I actually felt needed—like I could still make it in the world.

But that joyous moment soon faded. After all, Lady Rozemyne, the person who had given me a chance to begin with, wasn't there to share it with me.

The next thing I knew, two years had passed since the Ivory Tower incident. Everyone called me the shame of my family. I was used to being bullied and no longer saw the point in living.

But this winter, things felt just a little bit more manageable.

Because of my father's abuse, the cold shoulder I was getting from Lord Wilfried, and the general consensus among my faction that I'd wounded us all for no good reason, I no longer had a place at home or in the winter playroom. That was why I was so grateful to Lady Rozemyne; she treated me as warmly as she would anyone else. My story from two years ago was praised, and she even gave me some money as compensation.

I wonder if she'll do that again...

Nobody else could understand how much being able to live normally in the dormitory meant to me. Even my family considered me worthless.

“I’m going to write a story.”

I’d stopped writing when my life took such a turn for the worse, but I was suddenly overcome with the feeling to start again. I didn’t want to give Lady Rozemyne a transcription that anyone could produce; I wanted to give her a story that only *I* could write—not in exchange for playing cards, but as a show of appreciation. Anything would do. I just wanted to write *something*.

So I picked up my pen and dipped it in the ink jar.

Philine — Coming Home from the Royal Academy

A previously unpublished short story. Philine returns home after finishing her first year at the Royal Academy. After leaving the castle, she once again has to face the harsh realities of being a laynoble.

Author's Note: The sales bonus for Part 4 Volume 3 ended up being too long, so I took away the first half and turned it into this short story. Of course, this means there might be some overlap with the original, but this chapter focuses more on how retainers prepare for their returns home and the relationship Philine has with her attendant Isberga.

“Such introductions would normally be done by one’s lord or lady... but as ours happens to be in such a state, I shall act in her place.”

Rihyarda shot a brief, worried glance at the bedridden Lady Rozemyne before moving to introduce us to the adult retainers who had stayed behind in the castle. Upon our return from the Royal Academy, Lord Bonifatius had thrown Lady Rozemyne into the air and made her so dizzy that she was now having to rest.

“These two are Lady Rozemyne’s retainers from the castle,” Rihyarda continued. “I imagine many of you already recognize her attendant Ottilie, since she is Hartmut’s mother. The other is Lady Rozemyne’s guard knight, Damuel. He is a laynoble, but he has served her since she was in the temple and is very trustworthy. Those lined up against the wall over there are newly assigned to be milady’s retainers at the Royal Academy. First is the apprentice attendant...”

I knew Damuel well. In the two years that Lady Rozemyne had

spent asleep, he had served as our go-between with Lord Ferdinand and overseen the books being lent out in the playroom. I'd also helped him with his work, and we'd spoken often enough that I considered us to be on good terms.

"Philine, congratulations on getting chosen," he said. "I know how hard it is being a laynoble in this position, so you can always come to me if there's something on your mind that you feel you can't discuss with anyone else."

"Thank you," I replied. "I certainly will when that time comes."

Damuel knew that I'd been gathering stories for Lady Rozemyne's sake, and seeing his gentle smile and kind gray eyes made a pleasant warmth spread through my chest. At that moment, I decided to work just as hard as he did. We were now fellow retainers, after all.

"You're always welcome to come to me too," Ottilie added. "Send word as soon as Hartmut tries to make any unreasonable requests of you." She was wearing a kind smile too, and I noticed then that her eyes were just as orange as her son's. My worries about being treated harshly because of my status faded right away.

"Hartmut is always a very considerate teacher," I said. "It is because of him that I can proudly say I am Lady Rozemyne's retainer at the Royal Academy."

"That is nice to hear, but I mean it—you should tell me when he goes too far."

It seemed that even a focused and accomplished student like Hartmut had to deal with worried parents. The motherly concern on Ottilie's face and in her voice made me think of my own mother, who was no longer with us.

If she were still alive, would she have worried about me in the same way?

I was a little envious of Hartmut... but, more than that, being reminded of my mother again after so long filled me with a tender wistfulness.

Once we had all been introduced and given an overview of our duties in the castle, we apprentices were permitted to leave a bit earlier than usual. This was because we had just come back from the Royal Academy.

"Lady Rozemyne's adult retainers will accompany her for dinner," Rihyarda said. "Everyone else, you may return home and

spend the rest of the day at your leisure.”

“If you will excuse us, then.”

We passed through the retainer room and into the corridor; as retainers, we had to go through the retainer room whenever we entered or exited Lady Rozemyne’s chambers. We then made our way down the hallway connecting the northern and the main buildings. It was strange to actually be somewhere that was exclusive to the archduke’s children and their retainers.

“Here’s some advice for when it’s time to come back to the castle tomorrow,” Cornelius said, imparting to us some of the wisdom he’d acquired over several years as a guard knight. “Those who commute to the castle should arrive after second bell. We use the retainer entrance, which is on the first floor of the main building—on the north side. If you’ll come with me...”

We went through the retainer entrance and into the main building. Once inside, Cornelius called out for Norbert, the archduke’s head attendant and the man in charge of the archducal family’s retainers. “These are Lady Rozemyne’s new retainers,” he said. “They will be using this door starting tomorrow.”

“Yes, I received word from Rihyarda,” Norbert replied. “We have finished our own preparations.” He then looked at each of us in turn and said, “If the archducal family is to use a carriage, an attendant here will make the necessary arrangements. If any of you intend to use one, have your attendants put forth the request.”

Norbert was only involved with the comings and goings of the archducal family; the castle attendants dealt with everything else. He listed off more instructions and then guided us to another room.

“Your attendants prepared carriages for the trip home and are waiting for you here,” Norbert continued—and as he said, out came our attendants who had accompanied us to the castle. Each would guide us to a carriage emblazoned with the crest of our respective house.

Naturally, we were going to make our way out in order of status, which meant I would be last to leave.

“If you will excuse me. Let us meet tomorrow as the Goddess of Light rises.”

“Indeed. Cornelius, Brunhilde, Hartmut, Leonore—as the Goddess of Light rises.”

The four archnobles and then the mednobles Lieseleta and Judithe climbed into their luggage-filled carriages. Lieseleta was

returning home alone today because her older sister Angelica was due to guard Lady Rozemyne through dinner.

“Here you are, Lady Philine,” said my attendant Isberga once the others were all gone. We climbed into the carriage together.

Isberga was the older cousin of my late mother. She had ended up with some time on her hands after her own child came of age last year, so she had accompanied me to the Royal Academy. Nobody had been happier for me when I first learned that I was becoming Lady Rozemyne’s retainer.

Once we were seated, Isberga signaled the driver, and our luggage-packed carriage slowly began moving forward.

“I am so relieved to have finished the year without making any major mistakes or getting seriously scolded,” Isberga said.

Adapting to my sudden assignment as a retainer had been hard on the both of us—especially in terms of money. But rooming with Judithe instead of renting on my own helped a bit, and Rihyarda had paid me some of my salary in advance when I’d spoken with her about my situation. I’d also managed to build up some savings by gathering intelligence and stories alongside Hartmut, so I was safe for now.

“You should be proud, Lady Philine,” Isberga assured me. “It is a remarkable achievement for a laynoble to be selected to serve as an archducal retainer. I am proud of you as well. It was such a relief to see that Lady Rozemyne is kind to those who serve her and that your coworkers are all so welcoming rather than being the type to ostracize those below them in status. I intend to accompany you to the Royal Academy next year as well, so do put in a good word for my family.”

Isberga had only reluctantly accepted when I asked her to serve as my attendant earlier this winter, but now she was promising to stick with me next year as well. She was likely acting with her own interests at heart, but this benefited me anyway. My family had been getting increasingly distant since Mother’s death—but if they came back in force, Konrad and I would have some protection at home, where we had been facing more and more exclusion.

“Lady Jonsara has been treating us so maliciously since her own child was born,” I said. “It feels like she turned into someone else entirely, and with how much control Father gives her, I can’t help but worry about Konrad.”

I wouldn’t have been so concerned if my father would properly

stop Lady Jonsara, but he always gave her full control over matters of the house and tended to ignore our opinions.

“After giving birth, a mother tends to prioritize her child above all else,” Isberga explained. “Lady Jonsara may be more at ease when her son’s position becomes more stable, but as the wife of a widower, she is naturally faced with many hardships. She acts out of a desperate impulse to protect her child, so it cannot be helped.”

I couldn’t see Lady Jonsara’s new personality as anything but abrupt and unfair, but Isberga said there was nothing that could be done about it. Apparently, I would understand when I had a child of my own, though I didn’t *want* to understand something that could make a person turn so cruel.

“Still,” Isberga continued, “I predicted that this would happen and warned Lord Kashick again and again not to have a child with her. I wonder what drove him to impregnate a secondary wife nonetheless.”

“He could have at least waited until Konrad enrolled at the Royal Academy so I would not need to worry like this...”

My mother had passed away only a season or so after Konrad was born. According to what others told me, Father had thus been faced with two options: hire a long-term live-in maid to nurse him or take another wife. He chose the latter. It was the most economical choice, as I understood it.

“At the time, Lady Jonsara also happened to be struggling with the death of a family member,” Isberga said. “Given the trying circumstances, nobody would have criticized your father for taking her as a wife and using her Aunt Eineira’s services as an attendant—that is, assuming he had intended to use this help to support his own children.” She sighed. “Instead, he impregnated his secondary wife and abandoned both you and Konrad. His actions have been exceedingly foolish, and in truth, Lady Jonsara is shockingly ungrateful.”

Hearing her complaining actually made me feel a little relieved. It was nice to know that someone else was angry with Father and Lady Jonsara.

“I said all that to Father, but he gave me a harsh scolding and said that I wasn’t being considerate enough of Lady Jonsara’s child-rearing. However, I simply *refuse* his criticisms.”

“Oh my...”

“Mother put Konrad in my care before she passed away, but my

dear brother's situation really isn't good for him."

Lady Jonsara was always so busy with her baby that she would neglect to feed us. She shrieked in outrage over the smallest trouble, and she was always quick to raise her hand to us in the name of "discipline." Just thinking about her soured my mood. And if she was going to forget our basic needs, then the least she could do was not complain when I instructed the servants to prepare food on her behalf. If she was going to be all prideful about that duty belonging to "the woman of the house," then she should actually carry it out.

"I should like to have Lady Jonsara moved to a side building," I announced. "What do you think of that, Isberga?"

Normally, second wives were given side buildings in which to live, so as to avoid any disputes with the first wife and her children. Feuds and discord were nigh inevitable otherwise. Unfortunately, Lady Jonsara was not a normal second wife: she had been brought into the family to raise Konrad and me, so she had always lived in the main estate. That fact remained even now that she had given birth to her own child.

I didn't intend to push for a divorce or force Lady Jonsara to leave; I was well aware that she and her baby wouldn't fare well on their own. But if she was going to abandon Konrad entirely, I wanted her and Eineira to move into a side building.

"Now that I am Lady Rozemyne's retainer, my salary is higher than that of a normal apprentice. Konrad is also old enough not to require much extra care with meals and the like, so as long as I'm careful with my savings, I should be able to hire servants for him."

I was bringing this up now in hope that Isberga would give me her support when I broached the idea to Father, but after some thought, she shook her head. "I understand how you feel all too well, but I do not believe that is possible right now. We still do not know how much it will cost to prepare all you will need to live as a retainer of the archducal family. Do you believe Lord Kashick would choose to spend on both preparing a side building *and* supporting your new lifestyle? If he had such funds at his disposal, he would have hired a maid to begin with instead of remarrying."

Her calm, accurate analysis made me hang my head. I'd assumed that, because I now had an income and was soon to learn a new mana compression method, I would be able to protect Konrad without hurting our family's finances. But as it turned out, no

matter how hard I worked, I simply didn't have enough power yet.

"It is nothing to feel down about," Isberga said consolingly.

"Lord Kashick married into your family. He is not the head of your house, meaning the estate will instead be passed down to you and Konrad. Not to mention, as you have been chosen as Lady Rozemyne's retainer, they will not be able to treat you poorly. You will be of age by the time Konrad enters the Royal Academy, at which point you can use your status as someone serving the archducal family to give him the backing he'll require. You need only be patient."

I nodded. Assuming that Father and Lady Jonsara respected our positions more now that I was Lady Rozemyne's retainer, the abuse we were so used to would surely come to an end.

I was correct to offer my loyalty to Lady Rozemyne.

Whether it was by telling me to write down Mother's stories so I wouldn't forget them or choosing me as her retainer, Lady Rozemyne was always saving me. I was resolved to serve her as faithfully and as diligently as I could—and, at that thought, our carriage rolled into my estate.

"Welcome back, Lady Philine," said Eineira once we were inside. She and a male servant were the only ones here to greet us.

"Oh my..." Isberga remarked, her brow furrowed. "I sent word of our coming well in advance, so where is Lady Jonsara?"

Eineira turned around to look down the hall, then quietly replied, "My sincerest apologies, but she is answering the call of Wiegenmilch." That was what she said whenever Lady Jonsara was too preoccupied with her baby to do anything else.

Incidentally, according to Lady Rozemyne's picture-book bibles, Wiegenmilch was a goddess who raised and protected children before their baptism.

"I see," Isberga said. "I wished to greet her, but there is no helping that. Have the servant bring in the luggage. I will ride the carriage back later. Oh, and I wish to see Konrad again; it has been far too long. Call for him."

Eineira looked troubled by this request. "But he has not yet been baptized."

"That is not a problem; I am related to him through his late mother. I wish to see his face."

Realizing that Isberga wasn't going to budge, Eineira looked to me for help—but I certainly wasn't going to interfere. It would

greatly benefit Konrad and me to have Isberga in our corner, and getting her to meet my brother now would assist him considerably in the future.

“If you are busy, Eineira, then I will call for him myself.”

“Oh, no. Allow me. My apologies, Lady Philine, but could you serve Lady Isberga some tea...?”

“I can,” I replied.

I took Isberga to the guest parlor and did my very best to politely serve her a drink. She sipped from her cup and then grimaced a little; evidently, the tea wasn’t very nice.

“My apologies that I must serve our drinks,” I said. “Eineira is our estate’s only attendant.”

“That certainly seems inconvenient,” she replied, wiping her mouth. “To my knowledge, attendants trained in the temple can be purchased rather cheaply. They cannot use magic tools, but they should be well suited to a laynoble estate. Lady Rozemyne might accommodate the idea if you ask her.”

Indeed, maybe it would be wise to consult her when I properly started earning my salary. If possible, I wanted new attendants to care for Konrad and me, at the very least.

“I have brought Lord Konrad,” Eineira finally announced, slowly leading him into the room by the hand.

“Welcome home, Sister,” he said. “I’m glad you’re back.”

He looked thinner than I remembered, but I closed my mouth before I could say anything. Though I was concerned, I couldn’t bring myself to interrupt him while he was doing his best to repeat the greeting Eineira had apparently taught him. Plus, it would be rude to interrogate Eineira in front of Isberga.

“That greeting was excellent, Konrad,” Isberga said. “But you seem quite a bit skinnier than before. Have you not been eating enough?” She hadn’t so much as hesitated to voice what was on both of our minds.

Eineira gave another troubled smile. “Lord Konrad has always been a light eater. His appetite seems to have shrunk even more in your absence, Lady Philine, so we decreased his portions accordingly. I am sure he will start eating more now that you can have meals together again.”

Konrad bobbed his head and added, “I want to eat with you, Sister.” I was so glad to hear that he’d been looking forward to my return.

"I want to eat with you too," I replied. "Let us start having breakfast and dinner together."

"But... what about lunch...?" he asked, confused. "Won't we always be together now?"

An indescribable feeling of guilt arose within me. "Sorry, Konrad. From tomorrow onward, I'll be working in the castle like Father. I need to go there until sixth bell each day. Remember how I went to the playroom last year? It's—"

"No! Don't go again!"

"That isn't an option. This is an important job for me," I said, surprised to see him on the verge of tears when Isberga was here with us. It pained me to see him like this, but I couldn't have lied to him and said we would be together all day every day.

"Lord Konrad, you mustn't trouble Lady Philine," Eineira admonished, squeezing his shoulder. "You promised to be a good boy, didn't you? *And* we have a visitor."

Konrad looked up with a start, then hung his head. "Sorry for being so jealous..."

"Oh, I do not mind," Isberga replied with a kind smile. "You just love your sister, that's all."

It was then that the servant from earlier returned. It appeared that all of our luggage had been brought inside, which meant it was time to bid Isberga farewell.

"I thank you ever so much," I said to her. "It is because of you that I was able to lead such a comfortable life in the Royal Academy. I hereby conclude your service contract."

"The greatest reward I could have received was being able to witness your growth with my own eyes. I shall await your call next year as well. Now, if you will excuse me..."

Eineira, Konrad, and I watched as Isberga returned to the carriage. It started rolling along once again... and, the moment it turned a corner, Eineira's attendant-like smile gave way to a very fierce glare.

"You are *very* late returning home, Lady Philine. Sixth bell rang long ago. To think you would have us waste even more money on a servant than was necessary..."

"I don't want to hear any such complaints from you," I shot back. "The order in which we return home is dictated by status. More importantly... Konrad, let us eat di—"

"You were so late returning that Lord Konrad has already eaten."

Now, I must go bathe him. Use this time to eat on your own.” At once, she started tugging Konrad away by the arm. If she was bathing him, then she had probably been looking after him all this time.

“I thank you ever so much, Eineira. I trust you will bathe Konrad properly. Before then, however, I would ask that you help me get changed.”

The Royal Academy’s black uniforms were designed to be put on with the help of one’s attendants. In other words, I couldn’t take mine off alone.

Eineira frowned at my request. “Lord Konrad, off to your room.”

My brother gave me an imploring look. He had no doubt been lonely while I was gone, but he had to go; I didn’t want him hanging around while I was getting changed. I hugged him close and said good night.

“Konrad, may you have Schlaftraum’s blessing and a pleasant rest. We will eat breakfast together in the morning.”

“Yes, Sister.”

After giving me an overjoyed smile, Konrad headed off to his room. I was relieved by his obedience as I went to my own room with Eineira.

The servant had piled my luggage wherever was convenient, so my room seemed smaller than usual. As I gazed at some of the wooden boxes out of the corner of my eye, I opened my closet, inside of which were commoner clothes one could put on and remove without assistance. They were everyday outfits I would never wear in the Royal Academy.

“Lady Jonsara seems to be busy at the moment,” I remarked. “Has dinner been prepared?”

“Indeed. I must check up on her and cannot serve you your meal, but your food is ready.”

“I see. Tomorrow, I need to go to the castle at second bell. I will ask you to help me change again after breakfast.”

Eineira helped me out of my Royal Academy clothes, her lips pursed in displeasure all the while. As soon as she was done, she practically stormed out of my room.

I’m just glad she’s actually helping Konrad bathe.

I put on my commoner clothes by myself, served my own dinner in the dining hall, and then ate on my own. The food was so

plain and the atmosphere so lonely; I remembered the delicious meals and the lively conversations I'd shared with Lady Rozemyne and her retainers at the Royal Academy, and immediately I wanted to return there.

After my dinner, I went back to my room. I could hear the crying of a baby coming from somewhere else in the building. Much like Lady Jonsara herself, Eineira had been dedicating almost all of her time to the child since he was born. She only ever did things for Lady Jonsara and my father, so I doubted she would help me put away my things or prepare my bed for me.

How long is it going to be before I can sleep?

I looked around at my room, which had seemingly been neglected the entire time I was away, and sighed. I would need to clean up, change my sheets, and prepare for work tomorrow before I could get any rest.

Girls from other families were probably welcomed back by their mothers when they returned home from the Royal Academy. Even if their mothers had passed away, I assumed they at least had an attendant preparing their room for them. It really made me wonder how many other nobles changed into commoner clothes immediately upon returning home and weren't able to sleep until they sorted out their own living space. It was so pathetic that I wanted to cry, but I knew painfully well that getting emotional wouldn't achieve anything.

So, after taking a few deep breaths to calm down, I rolled up my sleeves and went to fetch some cleaning equipment.

Philine — My Knight in Shining Armor

The sales bonus for Part 4 Volume 3. Philine is ready to learn mana compression, but an unexpected turn of events complicates her plans. This short story covers so much of the day that Rozemyne wasn't able to witness.

Author's Note: Laynobles often lead tough lives, but Philine's house ranks low even among them. Damuel may be from a laynoble house too, but his family is richer, in part because of the Othmar Company's support.

The very instant first bell chimed, I opened my eyes and sprang out of bed. I was very excited, and for good reason—today, Lady Rozemyne was going to be teaching me her mana compression method.

Immediately I started to get dressed. In the Royal Academy, I would usually have my attendant help me, but the only attendant in this estate was Eineira, the aunt of my father's secondary wife. She would care for Father and Lady Jonsara, but the only time she deigned to assist me was when I needed to wear outside clothes. Otherwise, I needed to manage on my own.

Because I couldn't rely on an attendant here at home, I always wore commoner clothes that I could put on alone. I also did my best to help Konrad change, though I naturally couldn't be of much help while I was attending the Royal Academy. Eineira had at least looked after him in my absence, and it seemed that even now she was dressing him each morning. I really appreciated the extra time that afforded me.

Morning was an important time for retainers going to the castle. I gave my room a light clean, double-checked the clothes and other

things I intended to bring with me, then speedily moved to the dining hall. I wanted to finish preparing breakfast while Konrad was still getting changed.

First, I made sure to light a fire in the hearth; I was going to heat up the leftover soup that the chefs had made yesterday. Then, while that was warming through, I grabbed some bread from the pantry, cut off some thin slices, and toasted them with cheese. Nobody who saw me now would think I was a noble.

In my estate, to reduce the amount we spent on servants, we only asked the chefs to work from second to sixth bell. We also prepared our own meals instead of getting attendants to serve us. It wouldn't have surprised me to learn that rich commoners lived more like nobles than we did.

I certainly wouldn't want anyone to see me like this.

After putting the toasted bread on a plate and the warm soup in a bowl, I got some milk from our ice room and poured two cups. These past few days, this was normally when Konrad would arrive in the dining hall... but he still wasn't here. It was strange. I was working in the castle every day now, so he never missed a chance to eat breakfast or dinner with me.

Could it be that Eineira received a summons from Lady Jonsara?

If so, she was probably ignoring Konrad. I went to leave the dining hall to check on him myself, but then Eineira arrived.

"Ah, Eineira," I said. "Where is Konrad?"

"I went to wake him as per my usual routine, but he is not feeling well. I was told to let him stay in bed a while longer." A thin, mocking smile spread across her lips. "If you truly *were* Lady Rozemyne's retainer, we would not want your infamously sickly lady to become ill as well."

Eineira and Lady Jonsara still refused to believe that I was serving Lady Rozemyne. It was frustrating... but I did not care. Trying to convince them felt like a waste of my time. Besides, once Father returned from gathering intelligence in the castle, they would no longer be able to doubt me.

"I see," I replied. "In that case, once I finish breakfast, I ask that you help me prepare to leave for the castle."

Eineira heaved a drawn-out sigh. "Staying in the castle's playroom until the feast celebrating spring is important—I understand that—but you seem just as averse to spending time here as Lord Kashick." And with that critical remark, she exited the

dining hall. She frustrated me, but I needed to endure it for now; I couldn't put on my castle clothes without her.

I ate breakfast alone. Maybe because it was so quiet and lonely without Konrad, or maybe because it was such a plain and simple meal, I couldn't help but think back to the lively atmosphere and the delicious food served at the Royal Academy.

Though I'm still so much more blessed than Konrad. At least I get to spend my lunches with the other retainers.

After finishing my food, I put my dishes away and went to see my brother. Despite what Eineira had said, I still wanted to check on him.

If only Lady Jonsara had never become so neglectful... Then I wouldn't need to do this.

Lady Jonsara had married into our house as a replacement wife not long after my mother died—about a season after Konrad was born. Father had needed someone to raise us, so he was forced to pick between hiring a live-in maid and taking another wife.

At the time, our distant relation Lady Jonsara had also lost a family member and was struggling as a result. Father decided that it was more economical to take her as a replacement wife, and she brought her Aunt Eineira as an attendant.

And, at first, everything went well. Lady Jonsara was kind to us, and Eineira respected us as our father's children.

However, after Lady Jonsara got pregnant, she started treating us more maliciously. It was like her entire personality changed. This wouldn't have been too much of an issue if Father had intervened, but he ignored our complaints and refused to take the situation seriously. He was also leaving all matters of the house to his new wife, which only made her more arrogant. At this point, she would outright ignore Konrad whenever he got sick, saying only, "It had better not spread to my darling baby."

Father was warned. Isberga told him so many times that women prioritize their own children after giving birth.

Isberga was family on my mother's side, and she accompanied me to the Royal Academy as an attendant. She had told me that Lady Jonsara would start being more compassionate when her baby's position in society became more secure, but I wasn't sure that would ever happen. To begin with, Lady Jonsara barely had any family. She had gotten married in her early twenties, which was late for a noble, and came into our family with nothing but the

clothes on her back. She didn't even have a magic tool for her child, so it was unlikely he would get to live as a noble. And, considering that Konrad and I were children of our family's first wife, we would probably never escape her ire.

Isberga had said that I would understand Lady Jonsara's feelings after having children of my own, but I didn't want to understand anything that could make someone so cruel.

Still, Father is the root cause of all our problems. He ignored our repeated warnings not to have another baby before Konrad enrolled at the Royal Academy and, despite my pleas, still hasn't sent Lady Jonsara to the side building...

Second wives were normally made to live in side buildings to avoid conflict with the first wife and her children. Feuds and discord were nigh inevitable otherwise. However, Lady Jonsara was not a normal second wife: she had married into our family to raise Konrad and me, so she had always lived in the main estate. That remained the case even now that she had given birth, but was it worth keeping her here when it created such animosity?

I didn't intend to push for a divorce, nor was I going to make Lady Jonsara leave when she and her baby would struggle on their own. But if she was going to abandon her duty of raising Konrad, I wanted her and Eineira to move into the side building.

Father doesn't want to use it for monetary reasons, but the current situation really isn't good for Konrad.

I sighed, recalling how Mother had asked me again and again to take care of my brother when she was gone. It wasn't long before I reached his room—and when I went inside, I saw that he was still in bed.

"I heard you were unwell. How are you?"

Konrad said nothing. He just looked at me, blanched and clearly in pain. His skin had started to bubble a little, which could mean only one thing: his body was full of mana. Young children only needed to empty their bracelet once every couple of months, but he must have forgotten. I rolled up his right sleeve to check.

"You were taught to pour the mana from your bracelet into the magic tool beside your bed, remember? You... Konrad, where's your bracelet? And where did you put your magic tool?!"

There was no bracelet on his right wrist, and the tool that normally sat at his bedside was missing. Again, Konrad didn't respond; he just stared at me, stiff with fear, as if he had been

ordered not to reveal the truth under any circumstances.

"You don't need to answer," I said. "It could only be Lady Jonsara. She stole from you so she could support her baby."

Konrad nodded again and again, tears in his eyes. He suddenly seemed a lot less tense; he was probably relieved that I'd figured things out on my own.

She not only took his magic tool but also threatened him to keep quiet. Unforgivable! I'm going to reclaim what was stolen from him!

My brother's magic tool was made shortly after our mother died, using her feystone and most of her remaining wealth. It was the crystallization of her love—an heirloom meant to stay with him even as her face faded from his memory. A secondary wife stealing it for her own baby was deplorable. It was the absolute worst thing a human being could do.

Furious, I marched straight to Lady Jonsara's bedroom and threw open the door. She met my intrusion with a scowl and barked, "How rude! Get out of here at once!" This made the baby in her arms start to wail, which only displeased her even more.

Normally, I would have been too intimidated to resist any further—but when I saw my brother's bracelet on the baby's arm, I realized that I couldn't just leave. I scanned the room, ignoring the crying and shouting, and spotted the magic tool and the feystone inside sitting atop the fireplace. As soon as I saw them, I rushed over and stole them back.

"You are the rude one, Lady Jonsara! This is my mother's magic tool. It is for Konrad, *not* your baby. If you wanted your child to live as a noble, then you should have prepared what you needed when you first married into our house. I will *not* allow you to steal my brother's belongings! Know your place!"

Lady Jonsara's expression morphed into a picture of rage. "That belongs to my child now!" she screamed as she rang her summoning bell. I wouldn't stand a chance when Eineira arrived.

I returned Lady Jonsara's fierce glare with one of my own, but then her eyes wandered. She had noticed something.

"Sister..."

It was Konrad. He must have followed me. I moved to stand protectively in front of him, still glaring at Lady Jonsara, but this time her lips curved into a malicious grin. She no longer seemed to be under pressure.

"It is too late for you to simply reclaim the magic tool," she

said. “Given how little mana your brother has, he will not be able to refill it before it comes time for him to enroll at the Royal Academy.”

Lady Jonsara hadn’t just stolen the magic tool; she had also used up all the mana that Konrad had poured into it since he was born. A chill ran down my spine. Through that single cruel act, she might have made it impossible for my brother to live as a noble.

“Give it up.”

“No. I will not budge. Konrad’s future and your stealing Mother’s magic tool are completely separate issues.”

I gave the magic tool to Konrad. Lady Jonsara must have realized that I would come for the bracelet next because she produced her *schtappe* to stop me—and the moment she did, there came a quiet shriek from behind me. My brother had instinctively dropped to the floor and was shaking like a leaf, making the abuse he’d endured all too clear.

“What did you do to my brother?!” I screamed, so overcome with white-hot anger that I produced my own *schtappe*.

It was then that Eineira hurried into the bedroom. “Excellent news, milady! Lady Philine was hiding a small fortune!” She held up my savings—the money I’d put aside for the mana compression course—and my head suddenly began to spin.

“Is your whole family made of thieves?!” I cried. “That’s *my* money! You can’t have it!”

I had worked so hard to save up for Lady Rozemyne’s mana compression method. Were they seriously callous enough to steal the magic tool that Konrad needed to live as a noble *and* the money I needed to live as a retainer?

“Eep?!”

During the brief moment I was distracted, Lady Jonsara restrained me with light from her *schtappe*. I collapsed in a heap while she glared down her nose at me.

“I am the matron of this house, so it will be *my* child who inherits that magic tool. You are the one who must know her place!”

Again, she stole the magic tool from Konrad, who was still cowering in place. Then she opened my bag of money and started counting the coins inside with a gluttonous smile. Only after she was done did she return her attention to me.

“Eineira, remove these two from my sight. The storage room

will do. Perhaps watching her brother writhe in pain, his skin bubbling and blistering as his mana puts him at death's door, will make Philine a little more obedient."

I glared up at Lady Jonsara, letting the full extent of my hatred shine through. "You will not be able to keep me there for long. I am a retainer, so Rihyarda and Otilie will be suspicious of my absence. They will go to Father in the castle and ask after me. Naturally, he will not risk misinforming archnobles, so he will return home to see how I am doing."

I was bluffing. They would definitely be suspicious, but it was unlikely they would assume I needed rescuing. And while I genuinely believed that Father would check on me upon hearing of my absence, he would no doubt just send an *ordonnanz* to Lady Jonsara and accept whatever she told him.

The fact that I could remain so defiant when my back was against the wall went to show how much Hartmut's training had benefited me. He had warned me time and time again that showing fear or weakness when dealing with nobles of other duchies in the Royal Academy would make them look down not just on me but on Lady Rozemyne as well. He had said that it was precisely because I was a laynoble retainer that I needed to know when to defer to status and when to stand my ground.

Eineira looked worried, so my deception had probably worked a little, but Lady Jonsara just grimaced in displeasure.

"There is no point in acting tough. Eineira, the storage room."

As instructed, Eineira picked me up and threw me into the storage room closest to Lady Jonsara's bedroom. I struck the ground with some force and rolled a short distance. Konrad was then kicked inside as well, whereupon he landed on top of me.

"Ngh..."

"Sister, are you okay?"

I wasn't. Lady Jonsara was an adult, meaning she had more mana and was stronger than me. I couldn't break my binds. But even so...

"I'm fine," I said. "We just need to wait until Father returns."

Everything went dark as the door was shut behind us, then there was a merciless *clack* as the lock was fastened. Eineira hurried away soon after—presumably to report something to Lady Jonsara.

"Are you okay?" I asked my brother.

He paused and then replied, "I am. As long as I'm with you,

Sister.”

I wanted to ask about his mana, but it didn’t seem wise to disrupt his calm. Stirring his emotions would also stir the mana within him. I closed my mouth to avoid saying anything unnecessary.

After some time, second bell rang. This was when I would normally leave for the castle. I could just about hear Eineira suggest reporting that I was sick; unauthorized absences often reflected poorly on one’s parents, and Lady Jonsara wouldn’t want to damage Father’s reputation. I strained my ears in an attempt to catch more of their conversation.

“Rihyarda and Otilie must be her friends from the playroom, given how she addressed them without titles,” Eineira said. “Perhaps they work together as fellow apprentice scholars.”

“It matters not. Send word.”

“Understood. *Ordonnanz*.”

Eineira started making some presentable excuse about me not feeling well—but before she could finish, I took a deep breath and screamed, “GIVE ME BACK MY MONEY!” at the top of my voice.

A moment later, the storage room door was unlocked and thrown open. Standing before us was Lady Jonsara, snarling like a feybeast. She smacked me across the face with all her might. Then, before I could even process the pain, there came another loud *crack*, and Konrad cried out.

“Once again you disturb my baby!” Lady Jonsara shrieked. “How many times must I teach you this lesson?!”

“I... I’m sorry!” Konrad wailed. “I’m sorry! I won’t do it again!”

“Leave him alone!” I shouted. “Does Father know you’re doing this?!”

Lady Jonsara turned to me and roared, “Do NOT give me orders!” She struck me again and again until she was satisfied, then exited the storage room and relocked the door, leaving us in darkness.

“Konrad,” I said in a low voice, “does Lady Jonsara always hurt you like this...?”

There was a brief delay before Konrad started to explain what he had endured while I was at the Royal Academy. His retelling of events was stilted—as expected of a child—but the situation was clear: Lady Jonsara and Eineira had barely taken care of him, and they had struck him whenever they were in a bad mood.

“They never gave me breakfast...” he continued. “That’s why I was so glad when you came home, Sister.”

I took in a sharp breath. I’d expressed my worries about Konrad seeming thinner when I first returned from the Royal Academy, but Eineira had simply blamed his loss of appetite. That had been a complete lie.

“A-And... they said I couldn’t show you the bruises...” He pulled up his shirt. Even in the darkness, I could see the purple welts all over his stomach. Eineira had insisted on changing him so that I wouldn’t see them.

“I’m so sorry... I’ve been home for days, but I didn’t even notice.”

“They never hit me when you were here, so... Ngh!” Konrad groaned. It was hard to know for sure, but I could guess that his mana was running wild again. Unless we took action, he would end up at death’s door just as Lady Jonsara had said.

Oh, why am I so powerless?

Were I an adult, I might have been able to steal back the tool from Lady Jonsara. I might have been able to break these binds. But my age didn’t matter; I should have been able to avoid her attack in the first place. I could have fetched one of our house’s other magic tools and gotten Konrad to channel his rampaging mana into that. Or maybe, if I’d at least changed into my castle clothes, I could have used the ordonnanz on my belt to call for help. There was the mana-sucking black feystone too.

“Sister... Please say something...” Konrad said, his breathing now ragged. “Thinking about something else might help...”

Maybe hearing the stories that Mother had always told us when we were hurt or suffering would make him feel a little better. I started telling him the tale of a knight, which Lady Rozemyne had put in her book.

“I swear upon the Goddess of Light—if you call for aid, I shall answer. Say the word, and I shall be there. In your time of need, will you call not for Anhaltung the Goddess of Advice but for me?”

“Sister, will a knight save us too?”

“Indeed,” I said. “Surely... *Surely* one will come.” It was a white lie meant to put my brother at ease. If such a convenience really existed, we would not have ended up in this position to begin with.

“I hope they come soon...” Konrad said, leaning against me as he began to fall asleep. Bound as I was, I could neither pat his head

nor rub his back.

It was third bell. The mana compression lesson was due to begin, but there was no way for me to participate—not when I was bound and my savings had been stolen. My heart slowly shattered at the thought that all of my hard work over the winter had amounted to nothing. The brave front I was putting up fell apart, and tears streamed down my cheeks unbidden.

Just how much time had passed since we were locked in the storage room? I started to wonder, but then I was pulled from my thoughts by footsteps and the sound of Lady Jonsara's voice. "Philine's room is through here," she said as if guiding someone. I could only assume we had an unexpected visitor.

"Konrad," I said, "move aside a little." I wriggled along the floor like a worm, rolled onto my back, then kicked the door as hard as I could. I thumped it twice, then three times, and the footsteps started to get louder. Someone was coming closer, likely suspicious.

"That came from the storage room," Lady Jonsara said. "Something must have fallen." She was trying to smooth things over, but I wasn't going to let her win; I desperately kicked the door again and shouted, "I'm in here!"

"Stop! What do you think you're doing?!" Lady Jonsara screamed—then a thin cut appeared in the door, allowing light to pour into the storage room. A moment later, the door fell outward, revealing Damuel with a sword in hand.

"Philine is bedridden with a fever, is she?" Damuel asked, his voice harsher and colder than I ever would have expected from someone who was usually so warm. I could hear Lady Jonsara swallow a shriek.

"Well, there's Philine," Hartmut said casually. Lieseleta and Judithe were standing behind him, both grimacing. He peered around the storage room and then added, "It doesn't look like the money is here, though. C'mon, Judithe. That's our next focus."

Judithe looked between Damuel and me. "I think I should stay here. Damuel is a man, after all..."

"Nah," Hartmut replied at once, shaking his head. "Philine was likely bound for so long that she can't move on her own. Do you think you could carry her, Judithe?" He then gave Lady Jonsara a

dark, intimidating smile. "If this becomes an interduchy concern, the lives of whoever used the money could be at risk."

Hartmut's phrasing was enough for me to guess what was going on. They had said that my savings were given to me by mistake as an excuse to come visit me.

Lady Jonsara paled, then took Hartmut and Judithe straight to her bedroom. As they went, I heard Hartmut sarcastically remark that my room, where the money was supposed to be, was in another direction.

"I'll cut Philine's bonds," Damuel said as he entered the storage room. "Lieseleta, take care of the little brother."

Konrad was surprised to see so many new faces appear all of a sudden. His mana was still rampaging and making it hard for him to breathe.

"Lieseleta," I said, "if you have a black feystone with you, could you use it on my brother? His mana is overflowing."

"I do have one," she replied with a reassuring smile. "I must ask you to worry about yourself, though." She pressed the black feystone against Konrad's forehead, and immediately his breathing became less ragged. Having his mana sucked out must have been doing wonders for him.

"Philine, stay still for a moment," Damuel said. "I'll remove these for you." He turned his schtappe from a large sword into a dagger before slicing away my restraints. His cuts were quick and precise, leaving not a scratch on me, and the bands made from Lady Jonsara's mana soon turned into light dust. The rumors of him having enough mana to rival mednobles despite only being a laynoble were no exaggeration after all.

"I thank you ever so much, Damuel."

"Er..."

I noticed that his eyes had wandered to my attire, and my expression froze; I was still wearing my commoner clothes. They had buttons on the front so that I could put them on alone, and they looked nothing like the apparel of a proper noblewoman. It was enough of a blunder for someone to deem me unworthy of serving as an archducal retainer.

I tried raising my hands to hide the buttons, but my arms were too numb to move—perhaps because I'd been restrained for such a long time. I felt so pathetic that I wanted to cry.

"Lieseleta, could you help the little brother up?" Damuel asked,

directing her attention to Konrad. “Looks like Philine can’t move on her own after all.” Then, without another word, he took off his cape and wrapped it around me, hiding my commoner clothes from the others.

Again, I wanted to cry—but this time from happiness.

“Um... Damuel, these are...”

“Hm?” He raised an eyebrow at me, then pressed a finger to my lips as if to say that no explanation was necessary. His gray eyes were kind, and it was clear that he wasn’t looking down on me for not being more like a noble.

Ah.

The temperature of the room suddenly seemed to rise, and a crackling noise like thawing ice reverberated through my head. It was as if the Goddesses of Water and Thunder had brought spring to my heart. The Goddess of Sprouts smiled and waved her hand, causing slight feelings of love to blossom within me.

“Konrad, was it?” Lieseleta asked, snapping me back to reality. “Can you stand?”

I turned; my little brother could only nod when spoken to, but even then, he must have understood that these two were here to help us. He timidly accepted her outstretched hand and stood up slowly.

“Looks like he can move on his own,” Damuel said. “Philine, pardon me for a moment.”

He swept me off my feet as though I were light as a feather, his strong arms not wavering in the least. Perhaps because his face was now so close to mine, my heart pounded so hard in my chest that I worried it was audible. This was too stimulating for me, especially when I’d just been made aware of my feelings. The world around me was beginning to spin.

After kicking down the door in his path, Damuel stepped into the hallway. “Lady Rozemyne doesn’t forgive the mistreatment of children,” he said in a very knightly manner as he climbed down the stairs, all the while keeping an eye on those behind us. “Ask her for help. We can’t do much else for you unless you do.”

My heart continued to throb.

“Philine,” Damuel said. “Your father.”

I gazed ahead and spotted Father coming out of the parlor. He saw me being carried down the stairs... then immediately looked past us, searching for someone else. He cared more about his new

wife than his own daughter, and that reminder caused me to despair. Konrad and I had been freed from the storage room, but our torment would continue unless I retrieved his magic tool from Lady Jonsara and found us somewhere else to live.

But can I manage all that?

My unease and sorrow must have shown on my face. Damuel smiled to calm me down, then gave my father a harsh glare and shouted, "Get out of the way!"

Because of Lady Rozemyne, Konrad was able to relocate to the orphanage. Meanwhile, I began living in the castle, which meant I could no longer spend all of my time there in the northern building. It also meant I overheard more malicious whispering as I moved around.

"So that laynoble is Lady Rozemyne's retainer, huh? Just what did she accomplish to deserve that?"

"A laynoble with a home in the Noble's Quarter, living in the castle...?"

My shoulders trembled, and I sped up to escape the voices. Then, out of seemingly nowhere, an Ehrenfest cape caught my eye; at some point, Damuel had started walking beside me.

"All you can do is keep your head up," he said. "Fewer people will gossip once you start getting more mana from Lady Rozemyne's compression method."

It was because Damuel shared his experience and encouraged me that I could smile and relax here in the castle. He was always there for me, offering me a hand when I was hurting—and each time he did, I became more convinced that he was my knight in shining armor.

That said, I didn't expect my dreams to come true; I was well aware that Damuel and Lady Brigitte were in love. Plus, he was an adult; he wouldn't give a mere child such as me a second glance.

Still... I wish to treasure these feelings. And I won't be a child forever.

"Can you stay with me for a little bit longer?" I asked.

"Sure. Also, if things ever get really bad, be sure to speak with Lady Rozemyne. I might not be of much use, but she'll be able to help you for sure."

I gave a half-smile at his not-quite-right answer; it had recently come to my attention that his blindness to my love was perfectly in

character. Still, each day in the castle brought with it a new discovery. I was busy, but I was also having fun.

Charlotte — A New Step Forward

A previously unpublished short story that takes place near the start of Part 4 Volume 4. After being so abruptly denied a future as the aub, Charlotte has a tea party with her mother Florencia.

Author's Note: I turned what I couldn't squeeze into Part 4 Volume 4's sales bonus into its very own short story. This one focuses on Charlotte's feelings and socializing between a parent and child in the archducal family.

It was as I expected: the feast celebrating spring had ended with a clamor after Wilfried and Rozemyne's engagement was announced. And perhaps because the fiancée in question had immediately returned to the temple, the voices had only become more feverish from there. Wilfried was busy dealing with all of the meeting requests, but things were quiet for me now that I was no longer in the running for becoming the next aub.

In the midst of the commotion, Mother invited me to a tea party. Her room in the main building was very close to the children's room where I'd lived before my baptism, so returning to the hall actually made me a little nostalgic. I hoped that Melchior was doing well; his attendants had all informed me that he'd become a lot needier ever since I'd moved out. He was probably lonely too—this year's winter playroom had kept me so busy that I hadn't visited him very often.

"Vanessa," I said to my head attendant, "would it be possible for me to visit Melchior after my tea party with Mother?"

"Your request is too sudden for you to see him today. I will submit an inquiry for a later date."

Even visiting the chambers where I grew up required me to get permission first. Being a member of the archducal family really was tedious, especially when I compared my own upbringing to those of

my retainers.

After passing by the children's room, I ended up outside Mother's room. "Welcome, Charlotte," she said as I went inside. "It has been a long time since we last spoke alone. Hm... Let us go to my hidden room."

For her to have made a suggestion like that, we were probably about to discuss something that would disturb my emotions. Already feeling tense, I thanked her for the invitation and went into her hidden room. How long had it been since I was last here?

I took a seat while the attendants prepared tea, then several sweets I'd never eaten before were placed in front of me. The chefs had been working hard on new recipes in the run-up to the Archduke Conference.

"Sylvester bought these new recipes from Rozemyne," Mother explained. "He plans to introduce them during the Archduke Conference."

"One after another, my sister comes up with so many unique ideas."

Under normal circumstances, a noble who introduced a "new recipe" was actually taking credit for the work of their personal chefs. This wasn't the case for Rozemyne, though. As I understood it, my sister would teach her chefs what she wanted them to make.

"Mother, how has Melchior been as of late?" I asked. "I grew quite wistful when passing by his room and would appreciate the chance to visit him."

"He would be delighted to see you or Wilfried. All he seems to speak about these days is wanting his baptism ceremony to come sooner. At the moment, he and his attendants are planning what furniture to put in his room."

"Oh my. That seems quite premature, does it not? Melchior's ceremony won't be until next year." Early or not, they were likely already choosing their craftspeople. I thought back to my own pre-baptism preparations.

"You have been so busy running the winter playroom that you haven't been able to visit him as much, correct? I understand that he has been very lonely ever since you left for the northern building."

"I eagerly await the day he joins me."

On that pleasant note, the tea preparations ended, and Mother cleared the room of attendants. Only the two of us remained.

Mother smiled at me. “Charlotte, have Wilfried and Rozemyne told you much about the Royal Academy?”

“Yes, though Rozemyne speaks only of the library. It contains magic tools that take the form of shumils, and we are going to be making clothes for them, correct? My retainers are looking forward to participating.”

How many books it had, how much the librarian Solange was a respectable person, how amazing Schwartz and Weiss were... No matter how much Rozemyne’s attendants tried to keep her on track, she always ended up raving about the library in one way or another. Her attendants had seemingly accepted defeat midway through and were now letting her speak at her leisure. Her golden eyes sparkled with excitement, and only during that gushing did she actually seem her age. It made her so much more adorable than usual.

“And what does Wilfried say, I wonder?”

“He complains about Rozemyne dragging him into incidents, brags about having been selected as an honor student, and expounds his thoughts on gewinnen. Regarding that last point, he seems especially overjoyed to have beaten Lord Ortwin of Drewanchel. He spoke of their game on several occasions.”

“And what did your apprentice retainers who went to the Royal Academy think about that?” Mother asked searchingly. She wanted to know the unspoken truth behind the reports she was receiving. If any of the retainers were lying to her and Father, it would become hard to identify what was true.

“Wilfried tends to exaggerate somewhat,” I said, “but he *did* need to oversee Rozemyne’s march to have all of the first-years pass the first time around, attend several tea parties full of girls, and manage treasure-stealing ditto rematches... There can be no mistaking that he has been fighting hard.”

“I see,” Mother replied, sighing in relief. She had apparently worried about how my brother would fare in the Royal Academy, and the reports she had received probably weren’t too far from the truth.

“However,” I continued, “Rozemyne seems to exert a lot more influence. She beat Dunkelfelger at ditto, spread several new trends, established personal connections to the royal family and top-ranking duchies, and paid many students of other duchies for crest-certified work. She was absent for most of the term, but that

only encouraged a storm of rumors which gave her an even greater presence than if she had stayed.”

“In his reports to Sylvester, Wilfried mentioned only that Rozemyne has been dragging him all over the place,” Mother said. “We knew nothing else about what he has been doing.” She sipped her tea, then looked at me carefully.

I set my cup down and met her gaze, though I was feeling especially tense. It was clear from the look in her indigo eyes that she was about to broach the main focus of our meeting.

“I wish to apologize to you about Wilfried and Rozemyne’s engagement.”

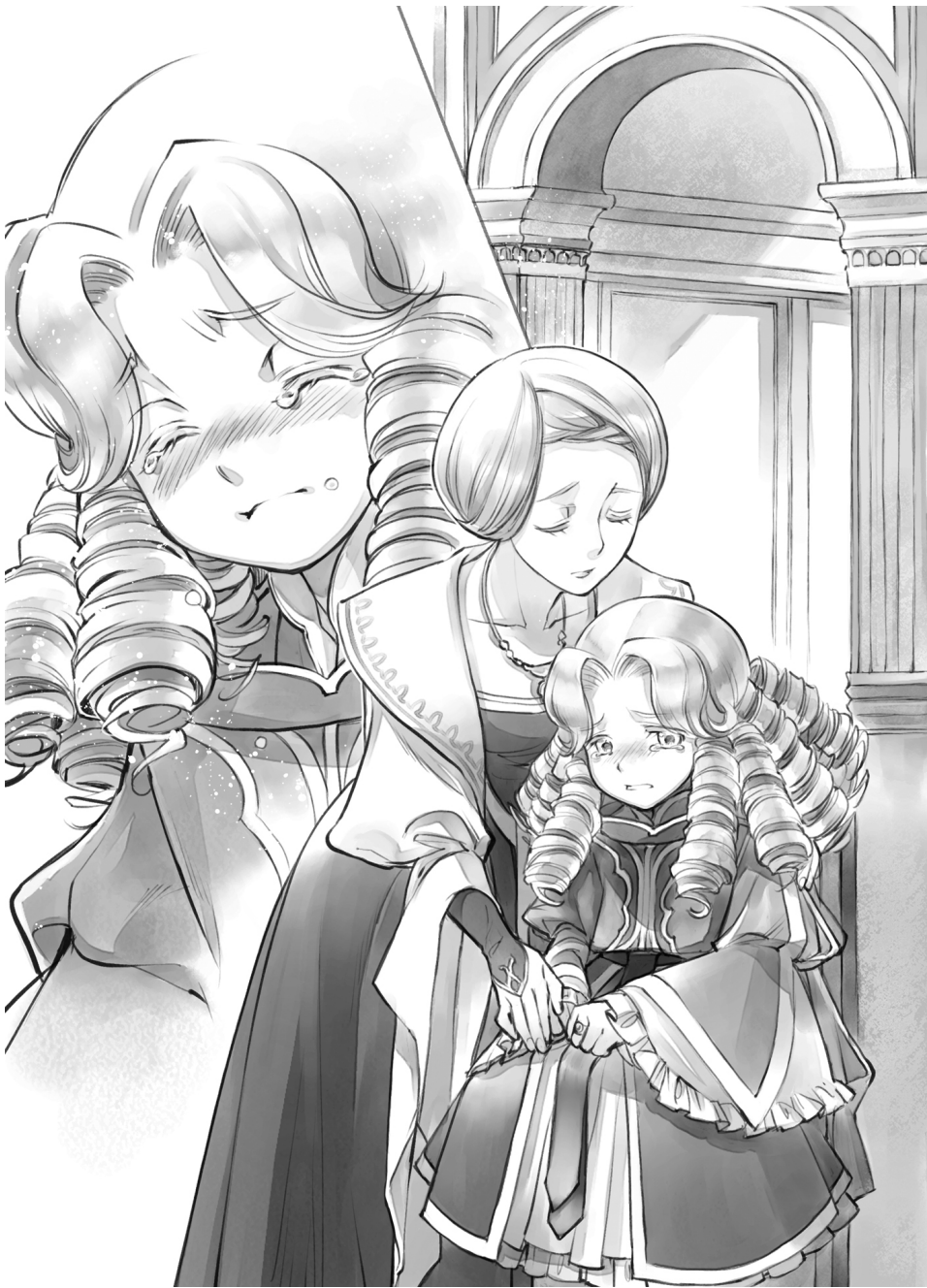
“Mother...”

“Not only have the duchy’s circumstances buffeted you with demands, but we have also stolen your chance to become the next aub. I regret these outcomes, and I truly am sorry.”

Much like Wilfried under Grandmother, I was raised to become the next aub—to compete with my brother for the ruling seat of our duchy. My archducal education had stopped and started again and again depending on Ehrenfest’s circumstances, whether they were Grandmother’s arrest, the Ivory Tower incident, or Rozemyne’s long slumber. But now, this engagement had put a definite end to my battle for the archducal seat. All of my training had been for nothing.

Hearing my mother’s apologizing roused the frustrations that had smoldered in my chest ever since the announcement. Finally, they began to rampage beyond my control.

“Charlotte,” Mother said. She rose from her seat and stood next to me, then tenderly rested a hand on my shoulder. At once, warm droplets rolled down my cheeks and dripped onto my hands, which were balled into tight fists.



"I could understand correcting the poor education he received from Grandmother in time for his debut," I said, "but then there was the Ivory Tower incident. That this engagement has returned him to being the next aub even after that is just too much. It feels like a road to the archducal seat has been paved just for him... He must have the love of the gods."

I had worked hard my entire life. Back when Wilfried was playing to his heart's content and being doted on by Grandmother, I was studying to become the aub. When he was throwing away his reputation in the Ivory Tower, I was honing my skills. And when my sister was rendered unconscious, I slaved away to fill the hole she left behind. Yet my efforts had never been rewarded—not since Grandmother was arrested and Mother vouched for Wilfried to become the next archduke.

"It just isn't fair..." I finally said, letting my displeasure bubble up out of me. It wasn't beautiful or graceful, but Mother did not scold me; instead, she simply stroked my head and my back, apologizing.

I wiped my tears away and took a moment to steady my breathing. Then, I took my mother's hand, smiled at her, and said, "I am okay now. The unfairness of it all does still frustrate me... but I would not have let it show if you had not given me the chance."

"Yes, I am sure," Mother replied. "Your retainers were very worried. They knew you would not express these feelings to them, so they asked me to lend you an ear as soon as I could."

Mother surely had a lot going on right now; the nobility was clamoring about the announced engagement, and the Archduke Conference was right around the corner. Still, at the urging of my retainers, she had invited me to a tea party nonetheless.

Even though she and my retainers are struggling as well.

I was no longer a candidate to become the next aub, but my retainers were being as hardworking and considerate as always. I needed to prove that I was deserving of their service.

"I understand that this engagement is what's best for Ehrenfest," I said. "But the thing is... if it were Rozemyne becoming the next aub, I would at least understand. She's better than me across the board."

My baptism had made us sisters, but Rozemyne had so much

mana and so many amazing talents that everyone thought her adoption was a foregone conclusion. I was under no illusions that I could even begin to compete with her. To me, my sister was the girl to whom I owed my life, and she deserved the utmost respect.

I continued, "Of course, I understand that her gender, health, and lineage would complicate her becoming the next Aub Ehrenfest. And with your influence, Mother, there can be no other pairing." Melchior was too young to be Rozemyne's partner, and I was a girl. "I shan't protest, as my sister seems to accept the engagement... but it bothers me that this marriage is the only reason Wilfried gets to rule."

"Charlotte..."

"I feel especially sorry for Melchior, whose future has been closed off before he could even be baptized." Neither one of us would ever become the next aub now. It was truly frustrating how often noble customs and expectations made one's hard work amount to nothing.

Mother shook her head, watching me closely. "He was never given a chance to begin with, so I doubt he would feel the loss so keenly. I am more worried about you." She was likely speaking from experience; the next Aub Frenbtag had been decided when she was barely a child, so she had scarcely been conscious of the situation growing up.

"I am okay with this as long as Melchior does not suffer from it," I said, then exhaled slowly. "I may be expressing my dissatisfaction with this outcome, but I accept it all the same."

This rare chance to be vulnerable and tell my mother my true feelings had been a great weight off my mind. Knowing that Melchior would not suffer the same frustrations and sense of powerlessness that I was currently dealing with put my heart at ease.

"It is as you say, Charlotte... Of my children, Wilfried is the only one capable of marrying Rozemyne as she spreads trends and advances industries. Please support him as his sister."

Sister...? We do share the same parents, but... Hm...

For the first time, I realized how differently my mother and I saw Wilfried. In my eyes, Melchior was my only true brother, but Mother seemed to view the three of us as a trio.

She still considers Wilfried her child, even though she never raised him? It was Grandmother who brought him up... after she stole him, that

is.

It was exceptionally bizarre. I had not lived with Wilfried prior to my baptism, so I felt as close to him as I did to my adoptive sister. In other words, he did not seem quite like a blood relative. It did not help that my experiences with Grandmother had only ever been unpleasant, nor that I was raised to beat Wilfried and become the next aub. Even now, I saw him less as someone to work alongside and more as a rival whom I could not afford to lose to.

Not that I can admit it. Mother considers all three of us equals, so it would only hurt her feelings.

At the moment, my relationship with Wilfried was positive overall. Grandmother was no longer around to show favoritism, and we now had an adoptive sister helping to close the gap between us. There was no need to go out of my way to mention that I did not view him as a true brother.

“Indeed,” I said. “Wilfried is still quite unreliable in some areas, so I will do my best to support him.”

Mother must have noticed that I was calm again because she went back to her seat and refreshed our tea using the implements the attendants had provided us. I took a sip of my drink and was immediately hit with a wave of nostalgia. This was my mother’s preferred flavor—one that I had drunk almost nonstop from an early age.

But it’s not quite to my taste anymore.

Slowly but surely, I was developing my own preferences. It seemed that my taste in tea was evolving as I grew and experienced the sweets that Rozemyne came up with.

“I was raised to believe that the seat of aub should go to whomever is most worthy...” I said. “Thus, even now, I think the position should go to Rozemyne.” She had an exceptionally clear vision of what kind of duchy she would want to lead. My heart had always been set on mundane developments, whereas her ideas were so much more impressive. “She has created whole new industries so, if we want Ehrenfest to grow, Wilfried should at least support her in his capacity as aub.”

Mother’s indigo eyes blinked in surprise. “Hm... Lord Ferdinand said the same thing.”

“Uncle did?”

“Indeed. He said that rather than Rozemyne learning to provide support, Wilfried must learn to take her reins.” Rozemyne had

apparently been furious about this, not wanting to be viewed as “some kind of wild horse.”

I giggled despite myself. “She would speak so harshly to Uncle, of all people?”

“Fearless, isn’t she? They always seem to be picking fights with one another, but I am told that is how they always act when they are together. It makes me anxious just watching them.”

I could guess that Mother was always silently debating whether it was okay for them to be so open with each other.

“Charlotte,” she said, her smile suddenly replaced with a more serious expression that made me sit up straight. “Someday soon, all of Yurgenschmidt will realize that Rozemyne is introducing not just new sweets and recipes but also new industries such as printing and paper-making. We cannot even begin to imagine how much influence she will wield when that happens. Many more duchies will seek to form connections with Ehrenfest than before.”

I nodded. Rozemyne was already receiving an impressive number of marriage proposals; once her engagement to Wilfried was announced and it became clear that she would not be leaving Ehrenfest, I was sure to be targeted next. Those who saw connecting with our duchy as a top priority would even want me as a first wife so that I could attend the Archduke Conference.

“In preparation for when you marry into another duchy, use this time to strengthen your bonds with Wilfried and Rozemyne as much as possible,” Mother said. “The strength of your connection to Ehrenfest will determine how well you can protect yourself in the future.”

“The strength of my connection...?” I repeated. Mother’s intentions were clear to me—I was now being raised not as the next aub but as the future first wife of another duchy.

“How you are treated in your new duchy will depend on the support and assistance you receive from Ehrenfest. For a woman due to marry elsewhere, what matters most are your foresight and your relationship with the next aub. Your partner’s love will not be enough.”

Is that really how Mother feels? Even though Father loves her so much that he outright refuses to take a second wife?

Again, Mother was speaking from experience. Her treatment had no doubt changed significantly after her family in Frenbeltag was wrapped up in the purge. I recalled Grandmother’s cold eyes

and sighed.

“In that case, I shall deepen my bond with Rozemyne.”

“Oh? Not with Wilfried?” Mother asked, her eyes wide. Most nobles would prioritize siblings with whom they shared a mother—and, considering that Mother and Father were close with their siblings in Frenbeltag, I doubted they would understand my choice.

“Rozemyne is far more reliable,” I said. “She rushed into the night sky to save my life even when we barely knew one another, did she not?”

Rozemyne was belittled in the shadows for having been raised in the temple, but I appreciated her deep compassion—a rare trait among nobles—and the way she could make decisions in the heat of the moment. If my life were ever endangered again, I could trust her to come to my rescue.

“There are many reasons I wish to be of use to Rozemyne,” I said. “Among them, I wish to repay the debt I owe her. Were I a man, I would do everything in my power to drag Wilfried down and then marry Rozemyne myself. I can say with all certainty that I would support her much better than he ever could.”

“Oh my, Charlotte...” Mother let out a gleeful chuckle. “Elvira would jump at the chance to write about two siblings fighting to marry Rozemyne.”

I did not want to be fodder for Elvira’s books, but I was speaking only the truth. “I really do want to repay her, even if only bit by bit. My hope is to at least cover for her weaker points.”

“Then study well. I assume you are aware of what the other nobles are saying about you participating in the printing industry before attending the Royal Academy. It was Rozemyne who pushed for your involvement, you know.”

The nobility called me an upstart for trying to involve myself with industries before enrolling at the Academy. Some had even said that letting me participate was foolish, since I would one day marry into another duchy and would potentially leak very sensitive information. Their voices had deeply frustrated me... but it seemed that Rozemyne had saved me once again.

“I did not know that...” I said.

“Sylvester informed me just the other day. You bemoan not having the favor of the gods, but they did bless you with Rozemyne.”

Somehow, hearing that filled me with strength. I gazed up at

my mother and gave a firm nod of agreement, at which point she smiled, stood up, and opened the door. Outside her room, I could see my retainers, all wearing very concerned expressions. They must have been very worried about me.

As I reunited with them, I realized that I had taken a new step forward—not toward becoming the next aub of Ehrenfest but toward being the first wife of another duchy.

Charlotte — My Task

The sales bonus for Part 4 Volume 4, set around the time Charlotte was first assigned to participate in the printing industry as a member of the archducal family. In this story, she receives a request from Rozemyne, who is busy in the temple.

Author's Note: The announcement of Wilfried and Rozemyne's engagement had a pretty sizable impact on Ehrenfest's factions and the atmosphere in the castle. Rozemyne doesn't really notice, since she's usually away in the temple and assumes the nobles' squabbling is business as usual, but Charlotte feels the change a lot more keenly.

After lunch, I began studying in my chambers. On my desk today were documents that Elvira had told me to look over before going to Haldenzel.

"This is... quite the stack," said Marvin, one of my scholars. He was in his forties and male, which was rare among my retainers. Previously, he had served my mother, but he had been reassigned to teach my other scholars so that I could participate in the printing industry. "It is definitely more work than one should expect a child not yet old enough for the Academy to manage."

"Is it?" I asked. "Two years ago, Uncle gave me much more than this and told me to memorize it before Spring Prayer." I thought back to that mountain of boards and remembered the struggle of working through them. Back then, I narrowly achieved the bare minimum of what was expected of me and was told to memorize the rest by next time. Now, in contrast, I was only having to look over these documents from Elvira, not memorize them. It was barely any trouble at all.

"I heard as much from Lady Florencia," Marvin replied. "I see that Lord Ferdinand is merciless to all, even children."

“Indeed. It would not be an exaggeration to say that my sister’s brilliance is due to his teachings. In the brief period between her waking up and going to the Royal Academy, he crammed so much wisdom into her head that she came first-in-class.”

Rozemyne had proven that she could consistently meet Uncle’s absurd demands, and it made me respect her from the bottom of my heart. Uncle was wise and talented, but he was also harsh and scary and rarely spoke a word of praise to anyone. He was the last person I wanted as a teacher.

“I see,” Marvin replied. “That said... these documents make it clear that Lady Rozemyne is less invested in her own position and more interested in developing Ehrenfest and supporting Lord Sylvester’s children.” He set down some budget and income documents, then pointed at a section in particular.

I leaned forward to look—as did my apprentice scholar Marianne.

“The industry has produced these enormous profits in the mere few years since its conception,” he continued. “Considering her position as an adopted daughter and the like, working alongside the aub’s blood children in such a manner would normally be unthinkable. Most would expect her to use this opportunity to monopolize the industry and its profits, strengthening her position and giving form to her faction.”

According to Marvin, my sister carried a burden that my brother and I did not—as an adopted daughter, she was forever having to demonstrate her worth to the nobility. That dissimilarity between our positions had never even occurred to me.

“Hmm...” Marianne looked contemplative all of a sudden. “So you say, but Lady Rozemyne’s engagement has made her position unshakable. Did she not have Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte participate in the industry precisely because she no longer needs to monopolize it?”

Marvin crossed his arms and gave a sardonic smirk. He hardly seemed to agree, which made me a little worried.

“Rozemyne approves of the engagement,” I said. “Do you believe there to be something wrong with it?”

“Well, who is to say whether she truly *does* approve? An adopted daughter cannot refuse a request made by her adoptive father. At the very least, the rumors flitting about make it clear that neither of their factions support the engagement. In that sense, can

you truly describe her position as secure?”

Wilfried was backed by the former Veronica faction, who criticized Rozemyne for her poor lineage and for having been raised in the temple. Conversely, Rozemyne had the support of the Leisegang faction, who said that Wilfried was a disgraced archduke candidate not fit to be the next aub.

“That is all true,” I admitted, “but nobles invariably find fault with anyone, do they not?”

Father was receiving criticisms from both sides for his decision to detain Grandmother; the Leisegang faction complained that he had done it too late, while the former Veronica faction complained that he had done it at all. Mother was accused of monopolizing Father’s love and not letting him take a second wife. And as for me, I was being held responsible for Rozemyne’s long slumber and getting called an upstart for trying to be involved with the printing industry despite not yet attending the Royal Academy. Being in the archducal family meant that, no matter what we did, we were sure to displease *someone*. Trying to respect every opinion was impossible.

“Blood children do not have to worry about being ousted from the archducal family over mere rumors,” Marvin explained, “but the same cannot be said for an adopted child. That is precisely why I would advise Lady Rozemyne to monopolize the industry to strengthen her position—were I serving her, that is. Still, the fact we are in this situation at all when she has Leberecht’s son among her retainers baffles me.”

Now with the precariousness of my sister’s position thrown in my face, I stared at the documents piled up in front of me. Under normal circumstances, Rozemyne would be monopolizing the industry for herself and using the profits to stabilize her position... but instead, she was sharing it all with us.

“She saved my life, shared with me her profits, and is pushing for me to participate in this new industry...” I muttered. “Rozemyne only ever treats me well.”

Few welcomed my association with printing—it was often considered too risky to let someone who would one day marry into another duchy be so deeply involved with a leading industry. However, it was precisely *because* I was going to marry elsewhere that I needed to participate. I could not afford to wait either; it was very possible that one year from now, after my first year at the

Royal Academy, there would no longer be any room for me—or perhaps there would be a considerable shift in what tasks I could give my retainers.

All in all, it was because Rozemyne had said to Father that all of his children should be equally involved in the duchy's new industry that my pride and dignity as a member of the archducal family remained intact.

“Oh, when might I finally be able to repay this debt?” I wondered aloud.

“The best way to repay her would be to learn well, Lady Charlotte,” Marvin said. “Become able to compensate for her faults.”

“Does she even have any?” I asked, tilting my head.

Vanessa, my head attendant, laughed. “You certainly are biased when it comes to your sister, milady. Do recall that she was raised in the temple and spent two years in a coma on top of that. The aub and others often say that her socializing skills are lacking.”

Ah, that reminds me... She definitely failed to understand the meaning of her own words when she promised to be my “ally.”

Perhaps the time she had shielded me from the veiled malice of other nobles had skewed my opinion. I remembered thinking back then that her socializing was perfect, but in careful retrospect, it seemed that she had been relying on stopgap phrases taught to her by Uncle. She was familiar only with oft-used euphemisms, which made me wonder how often she actually understood what people were saying.

“Furthermore,” Vanessa continued with a smile, “Otilie was bemoaning how Lady Rozemyne always prioritizes work over her bridal duty of learning to sew. She was hoping that you might spend some time practicing embroidery with her, milady. Lady Rozemyne is always so much more motivated when she is with you, so it would assist her greatly.”

I was by no means fond of embroidery myself, so Otilie must have been thinking this was an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. Even so, there was a lot more pressure on me to get better than there was on Rozemyne; I was going to be married into another duchy, whereas she was already engaged.

“I am likewise more motivated when with my sister,” I said.

“Then I will schedule more embroidery time while Lady Rozemyne is in the castle,” Vanessa said, excited.

Out of nowhere, a white bird that I recognized as an ordonnanz pushed through the window. It flew around the room, then landed on Vanessa's arm and said in a familiar voice, "This is Rozemyne. Please convey the following to Charlotte."

"Oh my... This might be the first time she has contacted me from the temple."

Had something happened to her, by chance? I watched the ordonnanz carefully, straining my ears so as not to miss a single word, until eventually...

"And so," the bird concluded, "I wish for you to investigate the time the Noble's Quarter was renovated and why the lower city was left out."

By speaking with merchants, Rozemyne had apparently learned about the lower cities of other duchies. She now wanted me to find out more about our own lower city.

Marianne gave me a curious look and murmured, "Lady Elvira is in charge, and she has her own scholars in the castle... so why has Lady Rozemyne decided to ask you, Lady Charlotte?"

Vanessa picked up the yellow feystone that had once been the ordonnanz and smiled. "City renovations must be done by the archducal family—have you not yet learned this at the Royal Academy? She no doubt wishes for Lady Charlotte's help because an archnoble won't have access to the information she seeks. Shall we send a reply of assent, milady?"

Of course, Vanessa was only asking for the sake of appearances; she understood well enough that I would never refuse a request from Rozemyne. She sent the ordonnanz back before I could even respond, while Marvin began clearing the documents off my desk.

"Lady Charlotte, let us hurry to the book room. If the relevant documents are not there, we will need to have the archduke search the archive that only the aub can access."

"Oh my. But fixing the lower city is an urgent matter; Rozemyne even said it must be done by summer. Should we not inform Father first?"

Marvin shook his head. Father was busy enough preparing for the Archduke Conference; if we were going to ask him to take on even more work, we needed to make sure we had explored all of our options first. These included collecting everything of relevance from the castle's book room and collaborating with Elvira, the industry's ultimate superior.

“Lady Rozemyne has entrusted this to Elvira first and foremost because she knows this is a very hectic time for the aub,” Marvin concluded. “We must not undermine her efforts.”

“Understood,” I replied. “Let us begin with the book room. Marianne, contact the scholars in Rozemyne’s chambers. I wish to know how they are coordinating.”

“As you will.”

This is a request from Rozemyne herself... I must make fulfilling it my highest priority!

I gathered my scholars and rushed to the library. This was my chance to repay her.

Almost immediately upon our arrival at the castle’s book room, we were joined by Rozemyne’s apprentice scholars Hartmut and Philine. They and the other scholars promptly split up and started researching entwickeln. Elvira and the layscholars working in the printing industry arrived as well.

“Lady Charlotte,” Elvira said, “we appreciate the magnanimity of your summons.”

“No, under normal circumstances, this investigation should have remained entirely within the archducal family. It cannot be easy being in charge of this operation, Elvira, but I must ask for your assistance nonetheless.”

After compiling various records, we concluded that large-scale entwickelns were carried out all across the country after a new invention from Drewanchel went public. Ehrenfest had planned to modernize its lower city as well, but this was postponed indefinitely when Great-Grandmother married into the duchy and it became necessary to renovate Groschel.

“We are unlikely to find much else here,” Elvira said. “As one would expect, more specific documents such as schematics from when the entwickeln was performed will be in the archduke’s archive. We will send our findings along later, but it would be best to tell the aub what we have learned as soon as possible. Unfortunately, it will not be easy to arrange a meeting with him this close to the Archduke Conference...”

Seeing her struggle, I decided to speak up. “Elvira, perhaps I could ask Father. I can report to him over dinner, which avoids all the hassle of arranging a meeting. That is presumably why Rozemyne chose me to help her in the first place.”

“Please do, Lady Charlotte. That would be exceptionally

helpful.”

I could not compare to the scholars when it came to gathering documents or summarizing their contents. For that reason, most of my day had been spent in the corner of the room, trying to keep out of the way while I went over Elvira’s printing industry documents to pass the time. It really hadn’t felt like I was contributing, so this was a welcome development.

“Ah, sixth bell... Could we compile our research tomorrow, by chance?”

“Let us gather again at third bell.”

Come sixth bell, the scholars hurried off. They were going to have to make numerous copies of the documents for their superiors, which was anything but a quick process. It seemed that we would need to spend a few more days visiting the book room.

“So, I investigated the castle’s book room with Elvira and the others,” I said, concluding my dinnertime summary of the day. “Our findings will be sent to your scholars at a later date, so please investigate your archive once they arrive.”

Father was visibly surprised to learn that renovations for our lower city had been on hold for decades. He rested a hand on his chin and frowned, deep in thought, then began counting something on his fingers.

“If we start now, we should still have enough time for the entwickeln. Thanks, Charlotte. You really saved us here. Good job finding all this out.”

“Thank you, but your gratitude should go to Rozemyne. She gathered information that could not have been found in the Noble’s Quarter and then gave us directions.” I also added that Elvira had assisted us as the printing industry’s highest authority, at which point Father promised to praise their efforts as well.

I returned to my meal, pleased to have kept my promise—but when I glanced up again, I realized that Wilfried was glaring at me with his cheeks puffed out. “How come Rozemyne always goes to *you* for help, not me?” he complained. “I could have done this a lot faster if she’d asked me as well.”

“Oh my...” I replied. “I understand how you feel, Brother, but are you not rather busy with your studies?”

At the end of winter, with the announcement of my siblings’ engagement, it had abruptly been decided that Wilfried would

become the next aub. This meant I was no longer in the running for the position, so I wasn't having to study as much as before, but Wilfried was having to study dramatically more. On top of that, we were both still participating in Spring Prayer and the printing industry. Rozemyne had no doubt been hesitant to load our brother with even more work.

I returned to my chambers after dinner and immediately went to bathe. To my surprise, when I was done, I came out to see my retainers all waiting around a table, wearing troubled frowns. Under normal circumstances, my scholars would have taken their leave by now.

"Lady Charlotte," they said, "Lord Oswald just visited."

Lord Oswald was my brother's head attendant—but why had he come immediately after dinner, when I was guaranteed to be in the bath and unavailable? It must have been very urgent. After bracing myself, I asked for details.

Marvin spoke first: "Lord Wilfried needs more achievements to his name, else the Leisegangs are going to tear him apart. That is why Lord Oswald came—he wants you to start taking his lord to the book room from tomorrow onward."

What? I-Is that all...?

I was psyching myself up to get dressed again, depending on the severity of the circumstances, but the unexpected request simply made me hang my head. Could this not have waited until breakfast tomorrow? I returned my attention to Marvin, wishing only to say, "Whatever. It makes no difference to me."

Before I could utter a single word, however, Marianne's eyebrows shot up in anger. "That phrasing was much too generous! Marvin, do you not always tell me to be precise with my reports? Forgive me, Lady Charlotte, but that explanation was not the least bit accurate."

As it turned out, Oswald had *actually* said, "This entwickeln job is not suited for Lady Charlotte, who will one day marry into another duchy. It should be Lord Wilfried, our next archduke, leading the investigation instead."

That really changed things. I was no longer being asked to let my brother accompany me; I was being told to surrender my task to him entirely. It was clear to me now why my retainers wore such deep frowns.

Marianne continued, “Lord Wilfried was recognized as an honor student in his first year, and it seems he has now finished preparing for his second. His retainers consider it more important for him to focus on gathering achievements than to continue studying.”

“As you are his sister by blood, they wish for you to help him,” Marvin added.

Instinctively, I put a hand on my cheek. It was true that Wilfried needed more achievements under his belt—but why had Oswald come to say this *after* dinner, and while I was in the bath?

“If my brother wishes to share the credit, could he not have made this request over dinner? We could have settled it then and there.” I felt sorry for Oswald that he had needed to carry out such an unusual order. It was bizarre to the point of being incomprehensible.

“Lord Oswald seemed displeased that you did not extend the offer yourself when Lord Wilfried complained at dinner,” Marianne replied. “In his words: ‘As someone who will one day be living in another duchy, Lady Charlotte must learn to be more observant of those around her.’ I must admit, his remark irritated me.”

It made sense that Marianne was fuming—she had only become my retainer a year and a half ago, meaning she had not experienced what things were like when Grandmother was active. In the past, incidents like this had been commonplace.

“Irritating or not, Lord Oswald speaks true,” I said. “Honing my observational skills will help me to avoid making enemies in another duchy.”

Vanessa nodded. “Furthermore, milady... for the sake of your future, you will need to make hard choices which cannot be taken back and take responsibility for whatever occurs thereafter. How will you act this time?”

Her words weighed heavily on me. Was it better to accept my brother’s request or reject it...? Elvira was the authority on these matters, so the fact that he hadn’t gone to her indicated that they wanted me to decide this on my own.

Elvira is of the Leisegang faction, after all.

Though I recognized that Wilfried was my brother and that he needed accomplishments as the next aub, the thought of him stealing work that was entrusted to me felt wrong. At the same time, however, I recalled what Mother had said.

“In preparation for when you marry into another duchy, use this

time to strengthen your bonds with Wilfried and Rozemyne as much as possible."

My retainers were all awaiting my response. So, after another moment of thought...

"We only finished searching for the documents today and have not yet compiled our findings. Wilfried can accompany me to the book room at third bell, assuming that works with his studying schedule."

I would not surrender the task that Rozemyne had entrusted me with, but I would at least allow him to participate. That was my decision.

"Understood, Lady Charlotte. Well done," Vanessa said with a nod and a praising smile. Marvin then departed to send word of my answer.

The next day, I came out of my room at third bell. There was no one standing in front of Rozemyne's chambers, so I wondered whether Philine and Hartmut had gone to the book room already.

I started making my way downstairs and saw Wilfried waiting at the bottom. "Charlotte," he said, waving up at me. "You know you didn't have to summon Oswald while I was in the bath, right? You could have said something at dinner instead of being all secretive. Father wouldn't have thought you're untalented just because you wanted my help."

What? Why is Wilfried acting like I went to him?

I was so surprised that I ended up literally speechless. The most I could do was blink at him, dumbfounded.

Wilfried puffed out his chest and added, "But hey, I may have a lot going on, but I'll never be too busy to help my little sister. You can count on me." It made no sense.

What is the meaning of this...?

Immediately, I gazed up at Oswald. He was looking back at me with a thin smile, his eyes cold and calculating.

Ah... He acted entirely alone.

Worst of all, there was no way for me to protest. Revealing my conversation with my retainers last night would seem like too much of an insult—plus, it would give Oswald ample reason to start telling other nobles that I possessed no situational awareness, thereby damaging my reputation.

I will never appreciate the methods used by Grandmother's former

retainers.

"I was told you need more accomplishments to your name," I said, trying to state my position clearly without being blunt enough to cause offense. But despite my best efforts, Wilfried paid me no mind whatsoever.

"Right. Well, let's go."

And with that, he started toward the book room. His retainers followed, poker-faced, while mine sighed and exchanged bitter expressions before eventually doing the same. It was like there was an unspoken rule to keep the truth hidden from Wilfried—and, at that moment, it felt as though we had returned to when Grandmother was in power.

Wilfried may have returned to being the next aub, but I do not want things to revert to how they were back then.

"Brother, how do you feel about the training of retainers?" I asked, steeling my resolve. I needed him to realize that Oswald was pulling the strings so that he could take action as his lord.

"I was just thinking about it, actually..." he replied. I started to loosen up—he had evidently realized that his retainers were misbehaving—but then he continued, "Rozemyne really needs to shape up. It's her duty to make sure her retainers are up to scratch."

He went on to complain about how uncooperative Rozemyne's retainers had been in the Royal Academy—but after seeing Philine and Hartmut work yesterday, I was under no impression that they lacked training or were failing to coordinate with their lady. I praised the fact they were such excellent workers after only a single season, even without an adult scholar around to train them.

"Your words are worth much consideration," I ventured. "We really must pay very close attention to what our attendants are doing."

"Exactly." He gave a great big nod in response but showed absolutely zero self-awareness. It was clear why Mother was concerned about his education even after he was recognized as an honor student.

At this rate, I cannot imagine him being able to support Rozemyne as the next aub...

I was worried about Ehrenfest's future, but I also felt powerless and profoundly frustrated that aubs were chosen based on gender more than skill. Why had I not been born a man? I would have been a much better partner for Rozemyne.

“I cannot help but wish I were a man,” I said provocatively. “I would not have lost to you then.”

Our retainers all sharply inhaled. A schism formed in the blink of an eye, and as tensions rose... Wilfried gave me a competitive grin, seemingly oblivious to the atmosphere forming around us.

“Hm? I wonder about that,” he said. “I beat Ortwin of Drewanchel at gewinnen, you know. You wouldn’t stand a chance.”

In an instant, the building tension dissipated. If that had been a deliberate move on his part then I would have had nothing but praise for him, but it seemed more likely that he had just spoken without thinking.

So... my duty is going to be to support both him and my sister?

The Royal Academy was filled with students from all over Yurgenschmidt, and I had been told that Rozemyne’s trends were securing Ehrenfest more connections with top-ranking duchies. I knew that Wilfried was working hard to make up for his lack of an education as a child, but as he was now, I didn’t have much hope for his socializing. Standing before me was a challenge far greater than any industry document or Spring Prayer memorization.

Will I make it before winter...?

It seemed that I had much to learn about socializing before it came time for me to join the Royal Academy.

Philine — I Serve Lady Rozemyne

A previously unpublished short story that takes place halfway through Part 4 Volume 4. While helping out in the temple, Philine looks back on how she came to be Rozemyne's apprentice scholar.

Author's Note: Rozemyne and Philine's meeting was cut from the main books because it was just too long to include, but I turned it into this short story to celebrate reaching fifty thousand Narou points. You might notice that Philine's relationship with Jonsara wasn't always so bad.

We were on our way to the winter baptism ceremony and debut, where I would first meet Lady Rozemyne. My heart fluttered as I climbed into my carriage and we pushed through the snow; as a laynoble, it was my first time going to the castle. I was nervous about the debut in particular, but my special red dress eased my heart. My late mother had worn it when she was young, though it had been altered slightly since then.

After we reached the castle, Father informed a scholar near the entrance of our arrival. We were given directions to a waiting room, so I made my way there with my great-aunt while my father and the others went to the grand hall.

My great-aunt was the younger sister of my grandmother on my father's side. Laynobles often struggled to prepare noble attendants fit for visiting the castle, so it was common to have a family member fill that role instead.

Upon our arrival at the waiting room, I saw several other kids with adults. "Philine," my great-aunt said, "all the children here are going to be your future classmates. Take care not to offend them or behave poorly."

I nodded obediently. In terms of status, I ranked low even among the laynobles, so I was under strict orders to watch my every

word and action.

Of all the children, Lady Rozemyne stood out the most. She was sitting elegantly and gazing out the window, her glossy midnight-blue hair rolling down over her shoulders. I could see that she was wearing a fancy hairpin of a style I'd never seen before, as well as a new outfit fashioned from the most beautiful cloth; she had probably had it made specially for today. I could not help but compare her vibrant reds to the duller shades of my own clothes.

"That girl is an archnoble, right?" I asked.

"No, that is Lady Rozemyne," my great-aunt replied. "She was adopted by Aub Ehrenfest, so take care not to stare uncouthly."

Seeing another girl my age was such a rare occurrence for me that I couldn't help but look at her. My mother's friends had at times brought their own children to play with me, many of whom were about as old as me, but that had stopped after she passed away. My father had then married the much younger Lady Jonsara, whose friends were similarly too young to have any children my age.

These days, the only child with whom I regularly interacted was my brother Konrad—but he was so young that he barely spoke any words at all.

My great-aunt told me that laynoble children should play with other laynoble children... but how am I supposed to recognize them?

Lady Rozemyne turned away from the window and leisurely scanned the room. She had remarkably pretty features and golden eyes that sparkled with amusement. The next thing I knew, we were looking straight at one another—and a moment later, she was smiling and waving at me! I was completely taken aback. How on earth was I supposed to respond without seeming rude?!

Of course, when I eventually came to discover what Lady Rozemyne was like, the answer became clear to me: I should have just returned the gesture.

The baptism ceremony went about as I'd expected; I repeated everything that my family had taught me, and it ended without incident. Next came the debut. We would each play the harspiel, offering our music to the gods.

"Philine," the High Priest called.

I took the seat waiting for me at the center of the stage, after which Lady Jonsara brought me my harspiel. It was a small

children's model which my mother had used, and on it I played the song that Lady Jonsara had taught me.

"Well done, Philine," Lady Jonsara said. "You played perfectly."

"You were no shame of a noble, that is for certain," my great-aunt added.

"Indeed," Father agreed. "You did well."

All three of them praised me upon my return. Now, I only needed to listen to the kids due to perform after me. I could tell as time went on that the songs were getting more and more complicated.

I struggled enough just trying to learn my song. I wonder how much the archnoble children had to practice.

At the time, I was unaware of what a tremendous impact a person's tutor and the quality of their instrument had on their playing. I was simply impressed by how hard I imagined the other kids had worked.

The last child to perform was Lady Rozemyne. Her name was called, and even the elegance with which she took the stage and sat down made her seem like she was from a completely different world than me.

Before the performance actually started, Aub Ehrenfest took a moment to tell us the circumstances surrounding Lady Rozemyne's adoption. He introduced her as the Saint of Ehrenfest, a girl who had enough mana to justify her place in the archducal family, so much compassion that she had worked to save mere orphans, and the skills to create new industries from the ground up.

Lady Rozemyne sat patiently throughout the speech, listening with a smile. She certainly was pretty... but she didn't seem all that extraordinary. I could tell that the adults in the audience were just as dubious.

Once the archduke was finished, a beautiful young musician brought an ornate-looking harspiel onto the stage. Lady Rozemyne accepted it, then plucked one of the strings, causing a high-pitched thrum to resonate through the hall. The melody she played was far more complex than any of the others that had come before, and she paired the beautiful rhythm with the most enchanting singing.

"Now consider me impressed. This song is complex enough that it could be taught in the Royal Academy."

"It seems that she is as impressive as the aub said."

Many in the audience quietly voiced their amazement. Lady

Rozemyne's playing was simply a cut above the rest.

"What...?" I muttered, rubbing my eyes in disbelief. It seemed to me that the blue light of a blessing was flowing out of Lady Rozemyne's ring. I thought it was an illusion at first... but another voice nearby confirmed my suspicions.

"Is that a blessing?"

It continued to pour from Lady Rozemyne's ring with each new note she played, slowly filling the grand hall. Seeing such a large-scale blessing for the first time had put me in a daze, but I wasn't alone—Father, Lady Jonsara, my great-aunt, and everyone else were just as awestruck. We all stared at the light over our heads, not even realizing that the performance was over.

"Behold, the Saint of Ehrenfest! May she be blessed for the wealth and glory she brings to our home!" came a sudden call. I returned my attention to the stage and saw the High Priest now carrying Lady Rozemyne in his arms. Everyone around me raised their schtappe into the air and made it shine.

"I see... So she *is* a saint."

"That was an extraordinary blessing. She *must* have the love of the gods."

As everyone stared at Lady Rozemyne in shock, she gave a gentle smile, waved, and then calmly left the stage.

"So saints *do* exist..." Lady Jonsara said.

"She has a lot of mana, that much is clear," Father replied. "I've never seen such a blessing before. Still... no matter how compassionate she's said to be, I can guarantee she won't treat laynobles any better than the rest. She's going to be your classmate, Philine, so you'll need to be especially careful around her."

The next day, I entered the playroom with great caution, keeping my father's warning in mind. We children were going to be grouped in accordance with our ranks. My great-aunt had told me not to defy the archnobles or mednobles no matter how they treated me; in her words, the playroom was a very tough place for laynobles until they could obtain the protection of an archnoble.

As it turned out, however, the playroom was nothing like what everyone had told me. The other children were all especially excited about the karuta and playing cards that Lady Rozemyne had brought with her, and sweets were distributed to all, regardless of status. Our professor read from a picture book about the gods, and

we studied the alphabet and simple math. Then, the personal musicians of Lady Rozemyne and Lord Wilfried taught us more about playing the harspiel. It was then that I first discovered how great an impact the quality of your tutor and instrument had on your playing.

While the rest of us studied, Lady Rozemyne sat on her own, reading thick, complicated-looking books she had borrowed from the castle or writing down stories to make into books of her own. She was far beyond the rest of us in her studies, carried out her duties as the High Bishop, won every game whenever she decided to participate, *and* could produce blessings simply by playing the harspiel. Calling her the Saint of Ehrenfest no longer seemed the slightest bit strange to me.

One day in the playroom, Lady Rozemyne came to me with a request: “Philine, do tell me your mother’s stories.” My mother’s passing meant there was nobody else who could share them, so it really warmed my heart that Lady Rozemyne was willing to listen and write them down.

“Philine, you should transcribe these to learn your letters,” Lady Rozemyne said to me when I was done. “I am sure you will pick them up quickly.”

She then gave me my mother’s stories she had written out and a bunch of paper to practice with. Her handwriting was so good that it was hard to believe we were the same age. I had only recently learned to write the alphabet, so I was sure her examples would help me massively.

“I expect you to be able to write your mother’s stories by next winter,” Lady Rozemyne said to me. She allowed me to borrow a picture-book bible as well—and, as a show of gratitude, I decided to transcribe the other stories my mother had told me too. I was sure that Lady Rozemyne would enjoy reading them.

Writing out my mother’s stories made me feel as though I were by her side again, and only during those moments was I truly happy. By that point, my mind was already made up: I wanted to serve Lady Rozemyne as her retainer.

It wasn’t long before I ran out of paper, so I asked my father to prepare some wooden boards for me. I continued to write, eager to show off the fruits of my labor during next year’s winter playroom... but when it came time for me to return, clutching my shakily

written stories, Lady Rozemyne was nowhere to be seen. We were told she had been attacked, poisoned, and put into a long slumber. Nobody knew when she would wake up.

I wanted the playroom to stay the same as when Lady Rozemyne was there, so I did my best to help Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte in her absence. There was only so much I could do, but Damuel was always there to guide us when we were struggling. He had served Lady Rozemyne since her time in the temple and, while he normally stood quietly to one side, he was always quick to answer any questions put to him.

“Damuel, do you have a moment?”

“Of course, Lady Charlotte.”

Damuel, who had become Lady Rozemyne’s guard knight despite being a laynoble, had somehow managed to secure the trust of all three archduke candidates. I found myself both admiring and envying him.

“So even laynobles can enter Lady Rozemyne’s service...”

Eventually, I decided to share my wish with him. I said to him that I wanted to serve Lady Rozemyne too.

“To what end?” he asked, taking my claim seriously instead of dismissing it outright. “What can you do for Lady Rozemyne?”

I paused to consider the question, and my eyes automatically wandered to the transcriptions I’d brought with me. “I can gather new stories,” I said. “Lady Rozemyne was overjoyed to hear them before, and my hope is to gather even more for her.”

“She certainly would appreciate that... Well, Lady Rozemyne doesn’t pick based on status so, if she recognizes your hard work, she’ll consider you for sure. Do your best, and good luck.”

Holding those words of encouragement close to my heart, I continued writing stories while waiting for Lady Rozemyne to wake up.

“Philine, why are you always writing stories?” Lady Charlotte asked me one day, her eyes drawn to the boards piled in front of me.

“I intend to offer them to Lady Rozemyne,” I replied. “I want her to rejoice when she awakens.”

“Oh my... Do you mean to say that you aim to become her retainer?” Lady Charlotte’s indigo eyes widened in surprise, which made me surprised in turn.

It was unthinkable for a laynoble to become an archducal retainer. Damuel was serving Lady Rozemyne simply because he had been with her for so long and most knights were loath to visit the temple—and, even then, there had been plans to replace him with a medknight or an archknight after the first year of her adoption. The only reason he hadn't yet been let go was because Lady Rozemyne was still unconscious.

"I have heard that, because he is a laynoble, Damuel is going to be replaced when Lady Rozemyne returns to us," I said. "I am a laynoble as well, so I do not think I could ever become her retainer. That is irrelevant, though; I simply wish to serve her."

"And *why* do you wish to serve my sister? You met her for the very first time during last year's playroom, did you not?"

I stroked my transcriptions. The stories that Lady Rozemyne had written for me endured in the form of paper and wood. No matter how many times I read them, Mother's kind storytelling voice arose in my mind.

However, the stories that *hadn't* been recorded continued to fade from my memory. There were several that I no longer remembered at all.

"By listening to and recording my mother's stories, Lady Rozemyne kept her alive in my heart," I said. "She did what no other could, and that is why she is my one and only lady."

All of those experiences had gotten me where I was now, working as Lady Rozemyne's apprentice scholar. I still didn't quite know *why* she had chosen me, but I was determined to serve her to the best of my ability until the day came when she told me I was no longer needed.

"Philine, scrap this and start again," Lord Ferdinand said to me, heartlessly returning the board I'd given to him. I was being asked to do math work in the temple, but it felt more like I was being tutored. Lord Ferdinand would expressionlessly reject my calculations more often than he accepted them, so it was hard to say that I was being of any use to Lady Rozemyne.

Lord Ferdinand wore a peaceful smile whenever he was at the castle, but here at the temple, he was generally expressionless—except for when he would knit his brow in a frown. He had nothing if not a pretty face, but those moments made my heart stop. It always felt like he was glaring at me.

“It’s okay, Philine,” Lady Rozemyne would say. “You’ll get used to his expressionlessness eventually. In fact, I think you’ll come to realize that his *smiles* are what you should really fear.” I still didn’t understand what she meant, which only went to show that I wasn’t yet suited to being her retainer.

“Rejected again...” I said, returning to my seat with my board of calculations.

Hartmut raised an eyebrow at me. “Try calming down a bit, Philine. A lot of your errors are simply because you’re looking at the wrong digit.” He was doing real work, not mere worksheets.

Damuel nodded in agreement; he was also working alongside us. “Your fingers are moving faster than before. You just need to be more careful about making mistakes. Plus, I can assure you—Lord Ferdinand isn’t angry at you, no matter how much you might think otherwise.”

I nodded in turn and said, “I will do my best.” Lord Ferdinand *definitely* seemed annoyed, but I knew it was wise to trust Damuel about these matters.

As I was redoing the math, Lady Rozemyne stood up and presented some documents to Lord Ferdinand. He looked them over and then said, “Very good” before handing her some more work to go through. It was ever so subtle, but I was sure that I saw his eyes soften a little as he praised her. Maybe it was just my imagination, though.

“This originally came under the High Bishop’s duties. Learn to do it.”

“It seems a bit troublesome...”

Lord Ferdinand was merciless when he delegated work, but Lady Rozemyne would always complete it without fail. I intended to do my best and be of as much use as possible, but I still had a long way to go before I could be deemed worthy of serving as Lady Rozemyne’s retainer.

“You’re working hard,” Hartmut said to me. “Lady Rozemyne rejoiced when she read the stories you gathered at the Royal Academy.”

“You’ve gathered many stories of your own.”

But while I was searching for stories that would make Lady Rozemyne happy, Hartmut was simply recording where the legend of her sainthood had started and how it had developed from there. He would always gleefully visit the temple, saying that the gray

priests and attendants from her chambers and the workshop offered the most riveting insights, entirely unlike anything heard in the castle.

“Hartmut, where are you going?” I asked.

“To the orphanage. Lady Rozemyne’s attendant Wilma and former attendant Delia are there, and they both tell very intriguing stories. People who find themselves in the same situation can still provide entirely unique tales about Lady Rozemyne depending on their position and relationship with her.”

Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne gave Hartmut even more duties than they did me, but he would always finish them swiftly and then start helping the gray priests with their work. He normally used that opportunity to speak with them about one thing or another.

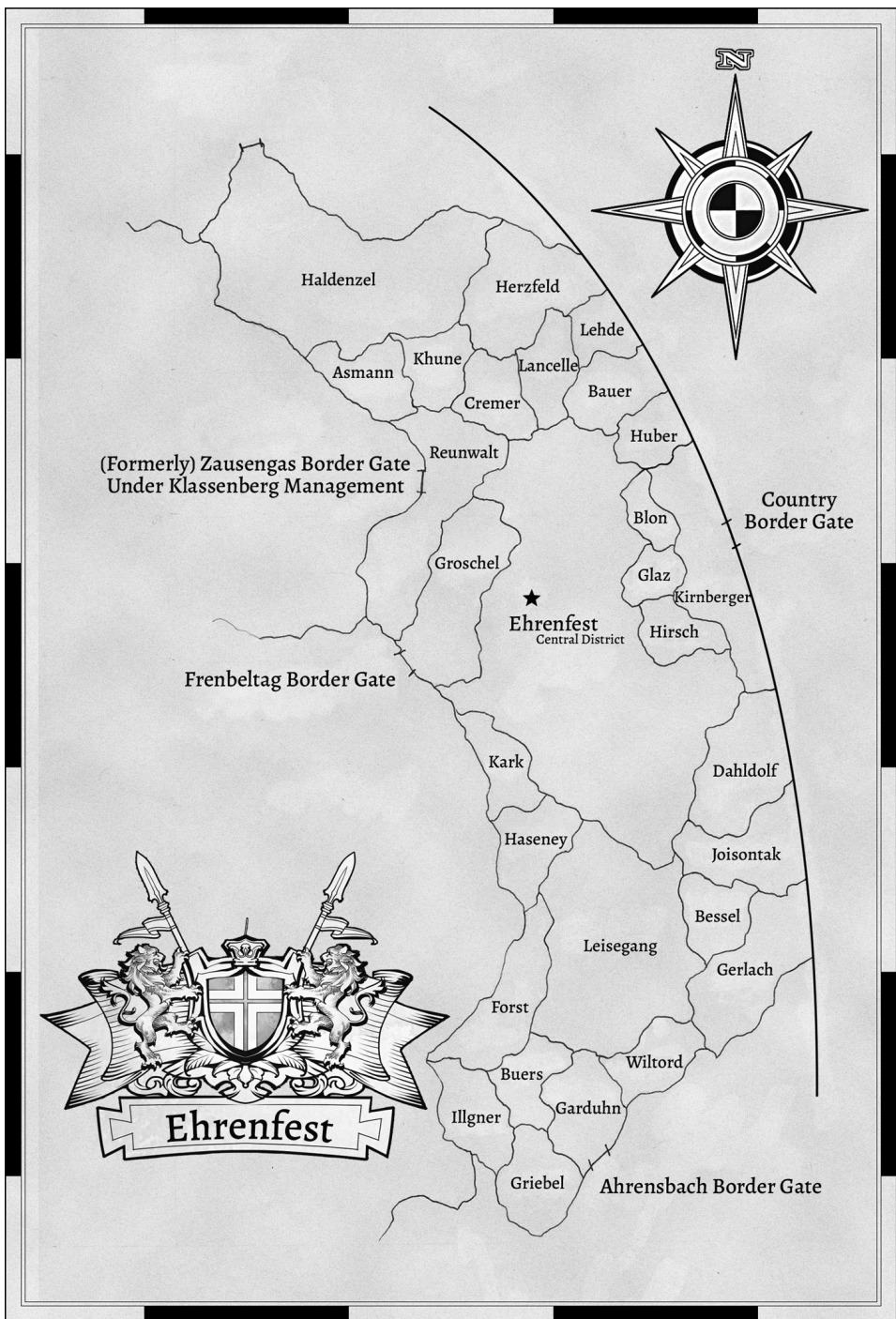
The temple attendants were generally tense around nobles, but Hartmut had managed to get past that by interacting with them casually and always starting up rousing conversations about what made Lady Rozemyne so amazing. I thought his people skills were very impressive, but he assured me that his techniques had all come from Lord Justus.

Incidentally, I still didn’t know very much about Lord Justus—other than that he would apparently cross-dress to obtain information.

“Keep on transcribing that Dunkelfelger book,” Hartmut said to me. “I’ll be back before Lady Rozemyne looks up from her reading.”

Hartmut only ever had spirited discussions about Lady Rozemyne in the orphanage, the workshop, or the High Bishop’s chambers—basically whenever our lady was focused on her books. I didn’t know how he managed it, but he always seemed to wrap things up right before Lady Rozemyne stopped reading. And, no matter where he went, he always got back in time.

On a daily basis, Hartmut’s supreme competence made my shortcomings all too clear to me.



N

Haldenzel

Herzfeld

Lehde

Asmann

Khune

Lancelle

Cremer

Bauer

Huber

(Formerly) Zausengas Border Gate
Under Klassenberg Management

Reunwalt

Blon

Country
Border Gate

Groschel

Glaz

Kirnberger

★
Ehrenfest
Central District

Hirsch

Frenbeltag Border Gate

Kark

Dahldolf

Haseney

Joisontak

Bessel

Leisegang

Gerlach

Forst

Wiltord

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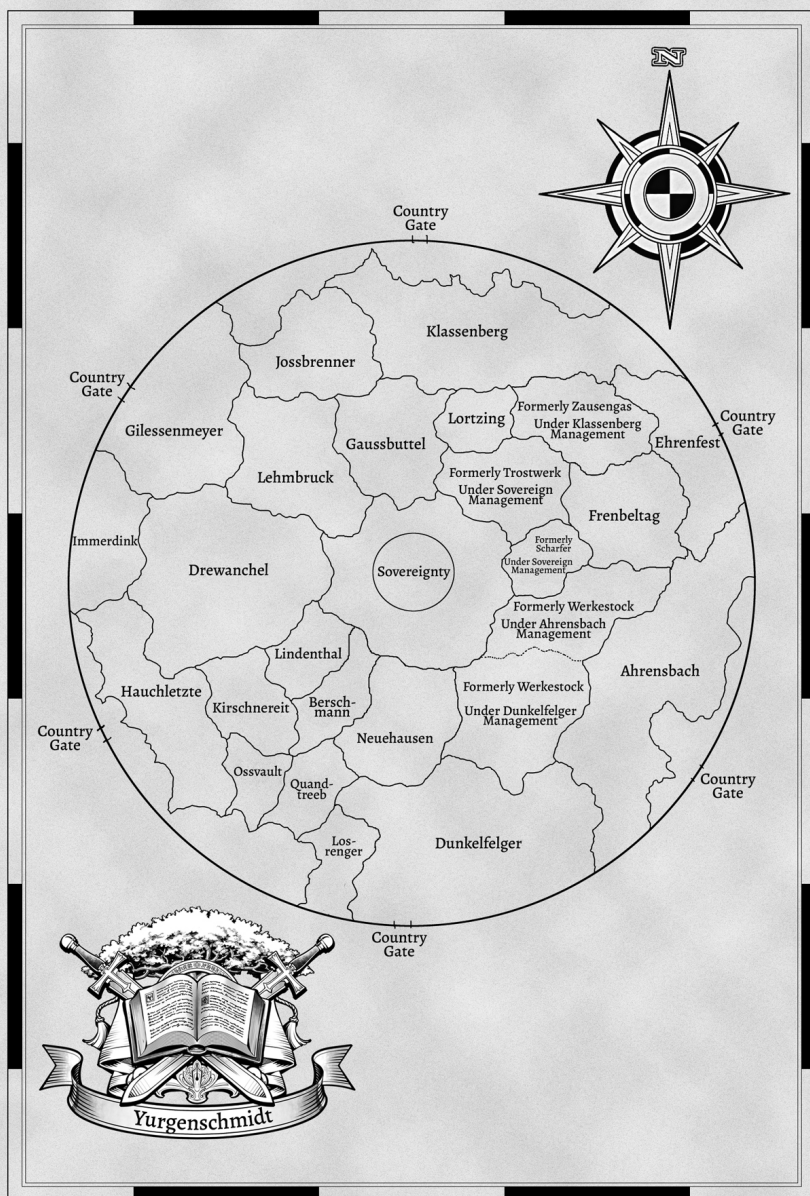
Garduhn

Illgner

Griebel

Ahrensbach Border Gate





Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm's* first short story collection.

This book contained all sorts of content, from sales bonuses to chapters that went completely unpublished. A few of the stories were already featured in the second fanbook but, because we have so many new readers now, we decided to include them here as well to make them more easily accessible. Hopefully this means those of you who only read e-books or simply live too far away from participating bookstores can enjoy them too!

These short stories appear in chronological order, and the first ones go all the way back to the beginning! Reading them might fill you with a sense of nostalgia... but when I started editing them for this collection, I was too busy writhing in embarrassment.

One huge attraction of this book is You Shiina-sama's beautiful artwork. It's as wonderful and enrapturing as ever! There were no new character designs for her to wrestle with, but these illustrations still caused her a lot of trouble. You see, in the world of *Bookworm*, about six years pass between Part 1 Volume 1 and Part 4 Volume 4. As you can tell from the cover art, Myne grew about twenty centimeters in that time—and other characters like Lutz and Tuuli grew about forty! I was often having to stop and think, "How old were these characters at this point in the story?" I'd use my fingers to work out their ages in comparison to Myne, then Shiina-sama would draw them to match!

Not to mention, the color illustration for this book is a gathering of so many main characters! She originally said that including *fourteen* people was completely unreasonable... but then she went ahead and did it anyway! Shiina-sama really can't be beat, and the four-panel manga she drew are as cute as always. Thank you very much, Shiina-sama!

This short story volume is due to be published around the same time as the anime starts airing! Not only can you experience Myne and everyone being brought to life, but you'll also get to see all of

the end cards drawn by Shiina-sama and others. Please watch until the end of each episode.

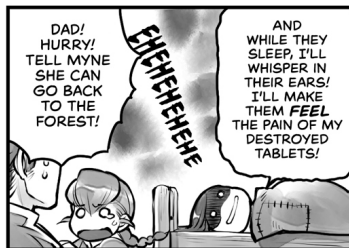
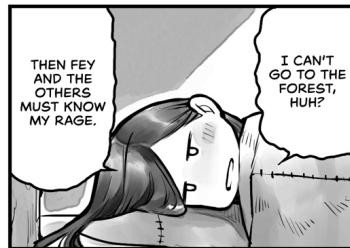
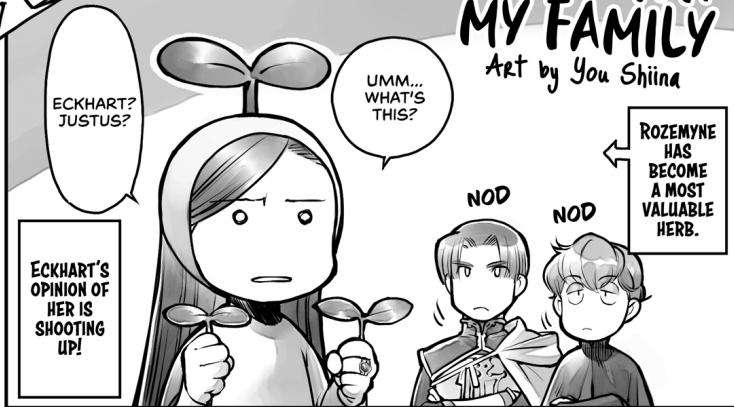
And finally, I offer up my highest thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 4 Volume 9 and the fourth fanbook.

September 2019, Miya Kazuki

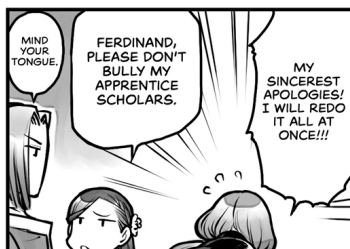
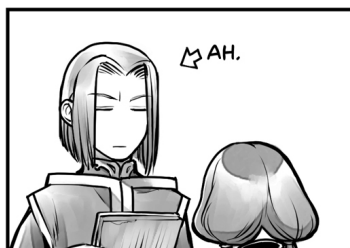
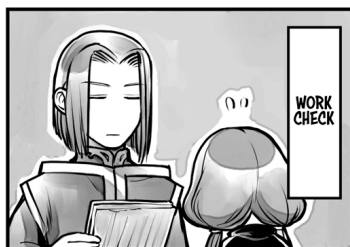
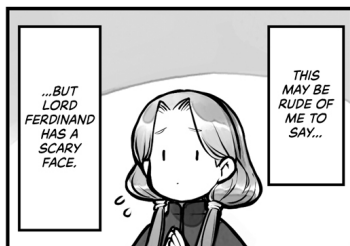
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END OF VOLUME
BONUSES!

A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY

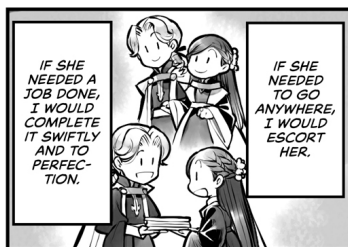
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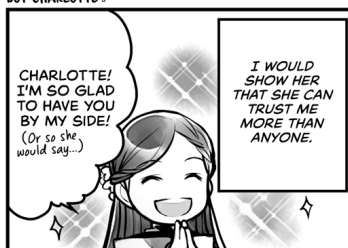
WARNING SIGN



WORK HARDER, BROTHER!



BOY CHARLOTTE ♀













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by Miya Kazuki

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